

Sutherland Transport & Trading

Another story from Alan M Watkins

These notes are prompted by the fine series of Sutherland T&T photographs on the *Ceased Bus Operators* Group. As well as their garage opposite the now demolished Sutherland Arms Hotel in Lairg, ST&T also had a garage at Ardgay near Bonar Bridge and several "outstation" vehicles were kept there.

In many cases, the Sutherland T&T outstation drivers were self employed with the company providing the vehicle and sharing the income from the Royal Mail contract, proportionately more to the company. At holiday times or in times of illness the journeys were covered by someone driving out from Lairg by car, operating the service, and returning to Lairg by car, leaving the bus in situ.

All the mechanics at Lairg also had a PSV licence and so could cover in this way. They also serviced/repaired vehicles for other small operators like Peter Burr at Tongue.

Earlier you showed a picture of the Durness outstation vehicle. For over 30 years the driver of this was Michael Mather who was also a crofter and fisherman so this job gave him a bit more regular income on top of his other activities. Michael Mather was still alive last year and is, I think, an honorary Highland Chieftain! So mostly they did do this job day in day out with the alternative arrangements mentioned above.

These services are mostly Royal Mail post buses today, still arriving at Lairg Station to connect to Inverness/Tain trains just before 11 a.m. and returning around midday or just after.

I cannot remember what the Scourie arrangements were but the Durness bus also did a local school contract before and after the mail run - these were not in the timetables so far as I know because the route varied as to where the children of that particular year were living.

Some of the other Sutherland T&T routes in Lairg are now covered by MacLeod Coaches.

My memory is that Sutherland T&T collapsed rather suddenly in 1976 (????) when the last surviving member of the family died. I have been told that their premises at both Lairg and Ardgay stood derelict for some years afterwards. I don't have my Sutherland T&T timetables to hand but I think the Scourie route did go via Laxford Bridge.

In that remote area the Achnasheen Hotel Company also operated buses (two I think).

Mostly the drivers of these Royal Mail services operated most days of the week and got more money for doing so. Often they operated the same routes for many years - that was also the case with David MacBrayne whose drivers on the Ardnamurchan Peninsula were taken over with the Acharacle Transport Company. MacBrayne covered holiday times by importing drivers from elsewhere for the week or fortnight - sometimes from Glasgow where many mechanics were Summer Only drivers but could be used on winter fill-ins as well. In that case the company paid for their B&B.

Some MacBrayne conductors also had a PSV so they could switch to driving in the high season leaving the company to hire in temporary conductors (such as me).

The ritual at Lairg still continues.....but of course the splendid buses seen in your pictures have long gone.

I have found some notes I made on Sutherland T&T courtesy of the late John Cunningham of the Transport Ticket Society. The last surviving member of the Wallace family died in 1976 and the company was sold on - the trading name remained the same.

The end of the road came on December 31st 1982 after the company were hauled before the Traffic Commissioners for major defects on the Lochinver, Bonar Bridge and Durness buses, the second time in a short period. The Traffic Commissioner confiscated their operating licence, a decision which apparently caused outrage in the local area.

Originally they also owned a filling station at Lochinver and another one elsewhere, perhaps Bonar Bridge, and for a long time had a fleet of lorries for haulage. They also had some private hire work in the season for fishing parties.

I got the impression that the company was in decline before Mr Wallace passed away - a lot of petrol station income had been lost to the arrival on the scene in larger towns of supermarkets and discount petrol outlets. Where have we heard that before?

A sad end, then, for a company which had provided transport to the community in one shape or another for a century.

Amazingly, the demise is recorded in the current archives of the Northern Times (which is still going strong), many of whose newspapers would have been delivered by the buses shown. [\[link no longer available\]](#)

http://www.northern-times.co.uk/news/fullstory.php/aid/3110/25_Years_...

Sutherland would not have survived the loss of the Mail contract because they paid a lot of money which is why companies like MacBrayne, Sutherland and others went to all the trouble of having custom-built mail buses. It was worth it for the money the Royal Mail paid in those days.

At MacBrayne's someone told me once that if the Uist services never carried a single passenger all year (they did, of course) the company would still have made a very substantial profit on operating the services, all of which were Royal Mail contracts.