Miller and Begg: a Railway Family

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Walter Begg was born on 6th September 1914 at Newtonmore, not just into a railway family but in railway premises: No.1 Railway Cottages. These are some brief notes on his and his family's railway careers.

The family's earliest involvement with the railway was through his grandfather Robert Miller, who was born on 15th August 1865 to William Miller farmer and Emilia Sinclair at Achalone, Halkirk, a small farming community just south of the site of Georgemas Junction on what is now the A9. The railway arrived in the far north and obviously employed many local people; by 1889, Robert Miller was a Platelayer and in 1901 he gave his occcupation as Railway Surfaceman, which he remained all his working days. He and his family lived in Halkirk and sometime in the mid 1890s they moved to Kildonan where they remained: Robert Miller died there on 9th September 1939, after a lifetime in the service of the Highland Railway in the far north.

His daughter married Robert Begg, who was born on 20th April 1882 at Lyth, Bower, midway between Wick and Castletown., and who may also have been a railwayman. His son Robert Begg must have joined the railway at the first opportunity,



for in 1901 when 18 the Highland Railway Co. sent a letter to Robert Begg, address Watten station, appointing him to a post at Kyle of Lochalsh on 20th May 1901 for the sum of 15/- a week. Photo 1 shows a fine group of station staff at Kyle; his granddaughter-in-law believes Robert Begg is the chap seated front row second from left. The variety of facial expressions, never mind the variety of uniforms, are a study - even the dog seems mindful of the occasion. The photo is undated but apparently another print has recently turned up independently, so it may be possible to date it. Notice the Stationmaster with fancy pillbox type cap, and the Guard and the Foreman with their entitled caps. Everyone else becapped has H.R.Co., except the Brian Blessed look-alike on the left whose heady entitlement I cannot make out. Can anyone state the role of the fearsome hairdo held up by stout-party underneath - the adjective 'redoubtable' comes to mind.

Late in 1911 the Highland Railway appointed Robert Begg Night Pointsman at Dalraddy, which necessitated a move to Newtonmore station on 22nd December 1911, where he would get 24/- a week for working all seven nights a week. (It is not known whether he moved from Kyle direct to Dalraddy, or was somewhere else in between).

Whilst Watten and Kyle were public stations, Dalraddy was a Private Siding between Kincraig and Aviemore, which was opened in 1910 and was lifted in 1917 when the main line was resignalled. There was already a crossing and a signal cabin there, opened in 1903, to cope with the increasingly heavy summer traffic in the Edwardian period: "The object was to prevent as much as possible delays and congestions in the busy time of summer and autumn." - *Banffshire Journal* 30th June 1903. An oddity of the thrifty HR was that they removed the points and signals each winter at various crossings; Dalraddy was such a place and this lasted until 1938. Quite what the siding was used for I am not sure - maybe it just led to a ballast working. Eventually, Dalraddy was reinstated as a crossing loop with a signal cabin in 1942. The workings at Dalraddy were described in *Journal* No.69, which gives a context for the work of Robert Begg. At some stage a signalman's cottage was built at Dalraddy - see Neil Sinclair's *Highland Railway : People and Places* - but it is not clear whether Robert Begg lived in Newtonmore and 'commuted' to Dalraddy.

Photo 2 is another study of station staff - this has been taken at Kingussie; it is believed that Robert Begg is standing second from right. There is no explanation why Robert Begg is in the Kingussie group, so it is possible that he had stints at Kingussie and Newtonmore as well as Dalraddy itself: the family



believed this photo had been taken at Newtonmore but we have now been able to establish beyond doubt that this is Kingussie. The staff are in HR uniform and from the lady's dress it is postwar but I'm not able to date it better than that. I would have suggested it was taken in winter with icy slush around but for the lad sitting down. Folks might have been hardy but not foolhardy!

By 1914, and maybe from appointment in 1911, the Begg family was at No.1 Railway Cottages, Newtonmore. Robert Begg died at Lochailort 28 January 1958, which was where his son Walter Begg was then working.

Walter Begg, as mentioned above, was born 6th September 1914 at No.1 Railway Cottages, Newtonmore. He certainly worked on the railway after the second World War, and presumably previously too, and worked up the career ladder until in 1950 he was appointed Station Master at Plockton. Not long after, in 1954, he was appointed Station Master at Lochailort, where he stayed until he retired; his wife was in charge of the local Post Office. Whether he retired from the railway or was made redundant, is not clear, but he presumably left the railway in 1965: the family has an announcement of a list of changes to positions for railway employees in the Mallaig area, with a torn note (!) about Lochailort no longer being a manned station. He died at Lochailort on 11th September 1972.

Photo 3 is a photo in Begg family hands; it is thought that Robert Begg is on the far left. Note the elevation - I know other stations had something similar (e.g. Tomatin), but this is the clearest photo I can recall.

My thanks are to Ingvild Begg who supplied scans of the photos and the family's details. Space forbids reproduction of two other photos taken at Lochailort, one of which is an atmospheric action shot of Walter Begg exchanging tablets with the driver of a diesel at night. Sources are original letters from The Highland Railway Company in possession of the family and the family's own recollections and research, with associated newspaper cuttings.

