

Ferry Connections in the Highlands



Gigha

Bob Barnes-Watts on behalf of HITRANS

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Fishnish Slip from the Lochaline ferry

Introduction

A recent issue of 'Scottish Islands Explorer' featured an article on what someone would find if they returned to the islands after having been away for 20 years. One view was, "the buses now connect with the ferries" and, by and large, they do.

Since August 2008, when HITRANS asked me to examine connections between ferry and both rail and bus, there have been many improvements, especially in respect of bus/ferry transfers on Skye and the ports of Caithness.

Various interim findings have been communicated to HITRANS and the transport operators during the course of this study as it was felt that action could be taken pending the final report.



Before CalMac – sign at Kilchoan

Contents

- Overview of connection policies.
- Description and observations of routes with their connections.
- Appended list of terminals with their transport facilities.
- Appended spreadsheet of selected services and connections.
- Sample itineraries, with actual experiences, using ferries, rail and bus.

CalMac – Relief Events

On two occasions I was told that “the ferry can't wait as we'll be fined”. According to the Caledonian MacBrayne publication, 'Performance Monitoring' (*April 2010, pdf attached*),

“There are a variety of relief events agreed by the Scottish Government: for example ... having to wait for the arrival of other public transport connections.”

If the crews of CalMac ferries and, indeed the intending passenger, were aware of this, a lot more people would have the confidence to embark on a journey using a variety of public transport modes.

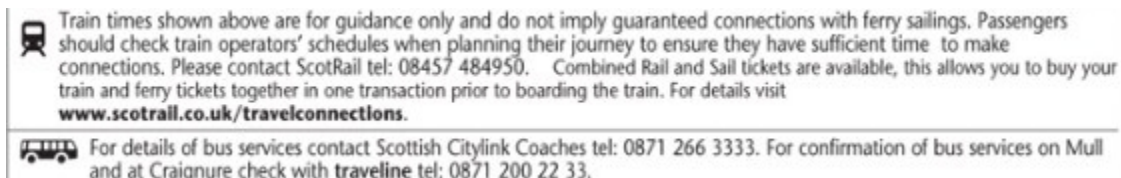


'Hebridean Isles' at Port Askaig, Islay

Connection Disclaimer in CalMac timetables

For many years rail times have been shown in Scottish shipping timetables.

A new 'Disclaimer Note' appeared in the Summer 2010 CalMac timetable as shown below:



What is an intending passenger to think when planning a journey?

If the train times shown in the table are not to be relied on, then perhaps they may choose to avoid the public transport option and drive.

Combined Rail and Sail Tickets

ScotRail offer Rail-Sail inclusive tickets, as mentioned above, to Armadale (Skye), Brodick (Arran), Castlebay (Barra), Craignure (Mull), Dunoon, Kirkwall (Orkney), Lochboisdale (South Uist), Rothesay (Bute), Stornoway (Lewis) and Stromness (Orkney).

Tickets to both Kirkwall and Stromness, via Thurso, include bus travel from the rail station at Thurso to Scrabster Ferry Gangway.

Unfortunately, due to commercial reasons, direct bus services from Thurso rail station to Scrabster were withdrawn from 25 April 2011.

Tickets to Stornoway include the Citylink 961 coach between Inverness and Ullapool; these connect with all ferry sailings.

Rail and Sail tickets are only available in Scotland but they are of little use to many 'local' travellers who hold Highland Railcards as the 50% discount is NOT available to those card holders. In those cases it is much cheaper to buy separate rail and ferry tickets.

Destinations NOT served by Rail and Sail Tickets

Rail and Sail tickets are **NOT** available to the following destinations:

- Coll
- Colonsay
- Lismore
- Port Askaig
- Port Ellen (no service in Summer 2011 due to reconstruction work)
- Small Isles (Canna, Eigg, Muck & Rum)
- Tiree

but the 'Disclaimer Notice', as shown at the top of this page, appears as a note in the tables showing the services to those destinations implying these tickets are available.

This is likely to cause confusion to anyone seeking to travel by public transport, which brings us to the thorny question of connection margins ...

Connection Margins ... General

Many services have been running in the same times for years. As an example, the morning coach from Glasgow has arrived at Uig Pier 10 minutes before the ferry sails for the Western Isles for quite a while, so it obviously works.

To a novice passenger taking notice of the instruction in the CalMac timetable that all passengers must be on board 10 minutes before departure, they could be forgiven in indulging in contrarary thinking that, "this isn't going to work".

Let us refer to the 'Disclaimer Notice' on the previous page as it affects rail to ferry connections.

In Summer 2009, the Wednesday only sailing from Oban to Colonsay and Port Askaig was scheduled to depart at 1530, 3 minutes after the arrival of the 1221 train from Glasgow Queen Street.

I was on that ship one day to see the train arrive at 1525 with the gangway being withdrawn a minute or two afterwards.

Bear in mind that this was a once weekly sailing with the 'official' connecting train being shown as the 0821 from Glasgow, due at Oban at 1127, 4 hours before the sailing ... not a very attractive travel proposition.

Fortunately that 1530 sailing, together with similar departures on other days to other destinations were retimed to 1540 for Summer 2010, just when the new 'Disclaimer Notice' appeared!

Does a passenger for Colonsay have time to get from the station, buy a ticket at the CalMac office in Oban and be on board within 3 minutes ... assuming the '10 minute rule' is assiduously applied?



Oban - The gangway comes up as the train arrives

Connection Margins and travel information systems

Sailing times of **Northlink** Ferries' services are shown on traveline and transportdirect as the minimum check in time e.g the 1315 from Scrabster to Stromness is shown as a 1245 departure.

This is in compliance with Northlink's 30 minute check in deadline but this means that any connecting transport must be scheduled to arrive prior to that deadline, otherwise the system will not acknowledge the existence of such a service.

While this takes the guesswork out of planning a journey, it also means that a potentially useful 'connection' goes unnoticed and a passenger willing to take a chance on making a journey will not be aware of the possible opportunity.

A case in point is the revised X99 service from Inverness. While the route now runs to both Scrabster Ferry Gangway and Gills Bay Ferry Terminal, the 0940 from Inverness to Scrabster is not timed to arrive at Scrabster until 1247, 28 minutes before the 1315 sailing to Stromness.

If an enquiry is made for journey options from the Scottish mainland to Orkney, this will not be shown.

I tested this service on the first day of operation, 25 April and it worked for me, despite the coach not arriving at Scrabster until 1258. I was able to buy a single ticket to Stromness just as the crew were about to 'shut the doors' but I think it was only because I was travelling light ... the luggage trolley had already gone.

The ferry cast off at 1307, 8 minutes early.

CalMac have the same system but only on some routes.

- Ardrossan to Brodick shows the 10 minute check in time as the departure time on traveline (see attached pdf). As an example, while the CalMac timetable shows the 1415 train from Glasgow Central, due Ardrossan Harbour 1509, as a connection into the 1515 ship, traveline will advise leaving GLC at 1345, changing at Saltcoats for a bus to Harbour Road, Ardrossan with an 8 minute walk to the ferry.

This is perfectly correct as a passenger would then arrive before the check in deadline.

- The Wemyss Bay to Rothesay route does **not** use the check in time as the departure time so a train arriving at Wemyss Bay 5 minutes before a ship departs will show as a connection. Those sub-10 minute interchanges are shown as connections in the CalMac timetable, subject to the 'Disclaimer Note' previously mentioned.

FERRY ROUTES

This section gives an overview of the main routes in the Highlands and Islands.

- Ullapool – Stornoway (CalMac)

Citylink operate a dedicated coach service (961) from Inverness (Bus Station) to Ullapool connecting with all sailings.

Passengers may load their bags at both Inverness and Stornoway and collect them at the end of the journey which means luggage does not have to be taken on or off the ship by the traveller.

Stagecoach service 61, which used to provide a similar service but running via Dingwall and Strathpeffer, has recently been revised and reduced in frequency and no longer runs in connection with ferry sailings.

- Scrabster – Stromness (Northlink)

Generally 3 sailings a day cross the Pentland Firth on Mondays to Fridays; there are 2 on both Saturdays and Sundays with a third sailing on Saturdays between mid-June and mid-August.

Please see the attached spreadsheet for details of the times and connections.

There has been a bus service linking the rail station at Thurso with Scrabster for some trains and sailings. This was withdrawn on 25 April 2011 in connection with an enhanced fast bus service from Inverness.

While the journey time has improved on the X99, the route does not serve the sizeable settlements of Beaully, Muir of Ord or Dingwall, places which are linked to Thurso by train.

The train also runs via Culrain (for Carbisdale Castle), Lairg and over the Flow Country where there is no alternative bus service, so anyone travelling from these areas will have to make their own way from Thurso Station to the ferry and vice versa.

Negotiations were underway to provide a bus from a stop closer to the station in connection with the 1359 Inverness train, due Thurso 1746, but at the time of writing (3 June 2011), traveline still shows the need for an 8 minute walk from the station to the Sir George Street bus stop.

It was disappointing to note that there was no information about public transport on the Caithness side available on the 'Hamnavoe', although details of buses on Orkney was available.

- Gills Bay to St Margaret's Hope (Pentland Ferries)

This route has benefitted from the dedicated X99 service which generally connects with the 3 daily sailings. Through passengers are required to change buses at Dunbeath.

Details are on the attached spreadsheet.

A problem occurs on Saturdays in May and June and further on Mondays, Fridays and Sundays in July and August when an extra sailing operates. The evening bus from Gills Bay will not then connect with the last sailing from St Margaret's Hope.

Pentland Ferries are more relaxed about check in times so, while they indicate they would like passengers to check in 30 minutes before departure, it's possible to buy a ticket on board.

Onward travel information is available both on board and in the ticket offices.

- Armadale – Mallaig (CalMac)

Details are attached giving connections at both Mallaig and Armadale.

This route is now well connected at Armadale thanks to a major revision of Stagecoach buses on Skye. All bar one bus is scheduled to arrive at Armadale in advance of the 10 minute boarding deadline.

The service is part of an interconnecting network on Skye giving opportunities to travel to all parts of the island plus over the bridge to Kyle of Lochalsh.

An innovation in 2011 is service 52X; connecting out of the 0930 Monday to Friday, 1030 Sunday sailing from Mallaig, it gives people a chance to visit the Talisker Distillery, Dunvegan Castle and Portree before returning to connect with the 1840 ship to Mallaig.

- Sconser – Raasay (CalMac)

Please see attached spreadsheet for connection details at Sconser.

This route has also benefitted from the general revisions of the Skye bus network, although the connection from Portree into the 1735 sailing is very tight to say the least.

- Tobermory – Kilchoan (CalMac)

From Kilchoan buses run to Fort William (502, 506), although it appears that the morning run from Kilchoan on the 506 has been retimed 6 minutes earlier to leave Kilchoan Slip at 0750 thus breaking the connection with the ferry due at 0755.

Some ferries will await the arrival of the bus from Craignure if the CalMac office is told on the day. Details in the Mull and Iona Transport Guide and CalMac timetable.

- Fishnish – Lochaline (CalMac)

The 495 runs up to 6 times a day via the slipway at Fishnish as part of the route from Craignure (for the Oban ferry) to Tobermory.

The 507 runs most days in the morning from Lochaline to Fort William, returning to connect with the 1645 ferry from Lochaline to Fishnish.

- Fionnphort – Iona (CalMac)

A very popular route for visitors and is served by bus 496 3 times a day (1 on Sundays) from Craignure.

- Uig – Tarbert (Harris) & Lochmaddy (North Uist)

Details of connecting bus and coach services are attached.

The question of whether some connections are valid has been discussed earlier.

- Kennacraig – Islay (CalMac)

The bus network on Islay has been designed to meet the needs of both schools and ferry traffic but only operates on Mondays to Saturdays between 0800 and 1830.

As the service has been revised to reflect the introduction of the MV 'Finlaggan', a summary of the connections at Kennacraig will be sent under separate cover.

- Tayinloan – Gigha (CalMac)

With a very sparse bus service to the actual terminal on Kintyre, anyone using public transport (Citylink 926) has to walk from Tayinloan Village, a 12 minute walk.

From what I was told, residents of the island tend to use their cars but visitors have been surprised that the 926 does not serve the terminal at Tayinloan.

- OBAN (CalMac)

The hub for many ferry services including routes to Barra, South Uist, Mull, Coll, Tiree, Colonsay and Islay.

For connection details please see attached spreadsheet.

Questions regarding the validity of connection margins have been highlighted earlier.

- Tarbert (Kintyre) – Portavadie (CalMac)
- Colintraive – Rhubodach (CalMac)

These routes provide a link between both Bute and Cowall and Kintyre. Primarily for those with their own vehicles, there are however up to 4 bus journeys a day linking Rothesay and Dunoon with Tarbert (Kintyre).

The 448 'Ferry Link' runs between Tarbert, Kennacraig and Claonaig for the

- Claonaig – Lochranza (Summer only) (CalMac)

which gives opportunities to visit Arran via the North End of the island.

The connections generally work well; a sample itinerary is attached.

The 448 will be included in the Kennacraig update referred to earlier.

- Western Isles Inter-Island services

Although not included in this study, there is an excellent network of bus services running from the Port of Ness on Lewis to Vatersay, South of Barra.

The Western Isles Overland Route has been developed by Comhairle nan Eilean Siar and offer connections via

- Leverburgh – Berneray (CalMac)
- Eriskay – Barra (CalMac)

These buses also offer connections in and out of most ferry services at Stornoway, Tarbert (Harris), Lochmaddy, Lochboisdale and Castlebay.

- Northern Isles

Apart from references to St Margaret's Hope and Stromness, neither Orkney nor Shetland services have been included in this report.



Conclusions

To many, the relative ease by which one is able to travel around the Highlands and Islands may come as a pleasant surprise.

The ferry network is relatively well-connected with other forms of public transport but there is always room for improvement. Some enhancements will require funding e.g additional buses, but others e.g slightly rescheduling some services to create robust connections, should not.

Clarification on check-in deadlines is needed. As mentioned earlier, many 'connections' work but, given the published rules about when a passenger should be on board, may not.

Better provision of accurate timetable publicity is needed. Ferry terminals and the ships themselves should always have details of the connecting buses and trains and vice versa. Services must not run in isolation; it would be helpful if staff on all modes of transport were aware of connections e.g details to be shown on bus drivers 'running boards'.

Finally, 'to wait or not to wait'! Publicising 'guaranteed connections' together with a note of arrangements should something go awry would go a long way to allaying the 'what if ...' fears of potential passengers.

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