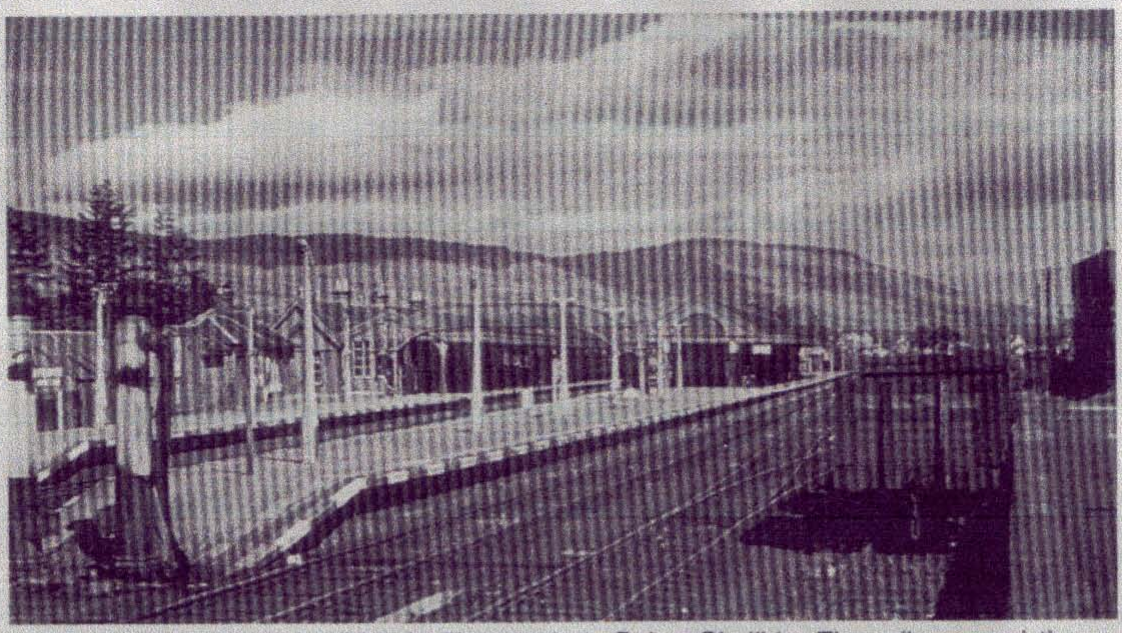


Aviemore Junction in 1953, looking north to Beinn Ghuilbin. The railway, and the scenery, were significant factors in the development of Aviemore over the years.

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO OLD AVIEMORE?

Ann Glen

"IT'S brash, it's a mess, it's become the Blackpool of the Highlands" — thus the comments run on Aviemore. Poor old Aviemore; it was not always so, especially to those who knew the place before it became the tourist king-pin in the absurdly-named "Spey Valley" that for centuries had been Strathspey.

The first farmers about 4000 years ago left little mark apart from stone circles. A ring cairn now stands incongruously amid modern bungalows in Aviemore. In truth, there was little to attract folk to settle. Glacial melt waters had left mounds of stony rock waste which now underlie the site where the village was to grow. From an agricultural point of view, it is poor land — too free draining and infertile. Rearing cattle was a better proposition than growing crops.

About 1728, Aviemore as a community got its start with the construction of the great Military Road from Dunkeld to Inverness. General Wade made a base close by, probably in one of the huts thrown up to protect the troops engaged on their summer stint of road making. He became a regular and unwanted visitor to the table of the Laird of Rothiemurchus. Perhaps the General was just in search of a decent meal. One night the Laird took matters in hand. Locking the door when the two were alone, he proposed that they toast "The King over the Water" — in other words, the Stewart claimant to the throne. Wade was horrified at being so compromised and never returned.

Shortly, the Laird of Grant had an inn opened at Aviemore. The government was anxious to see these established along the military roads. It even offered subsidies to those who set up such facilities or "King's Houses". The first inn was a rough affair built of rubble with a roof of

heather thatch; it was single storeyed and had garrets above. Meanwhile a route had been formed to link the military road with the Grant domain at Castle Grant to the north. This made Aviemore a road junction.

In 1746, the Jacobite army went past the inn en route to Inverness and Culloden; only stirrup cups may have been taken there for Prince Charles Edward Stewart did not overnight in the inn — possibly a reflection on its unwholesome condition.

Meanwhile Aviemore's name had been appearing on maps. *Blaeu's Atlas* of 1654 shows "Avimoir" and later General William Roy's Military Survey of c. 1755 includes "Avemoir". It was becoming a place of transit rather than of residence, an aspect that was emphasised when a new inn was planned.

Hearing of the building by Colquhoun of Luss of a superior inn on Loch Lomondside, and of another by the Duke of Atholl at Blair in 1765, the laird James Grant of Grant had new premises constructed in front of the old inn. He had "no view but to accommodate travellers" and stated his intention of "demanding nothing from his tenant but serving his guests well."

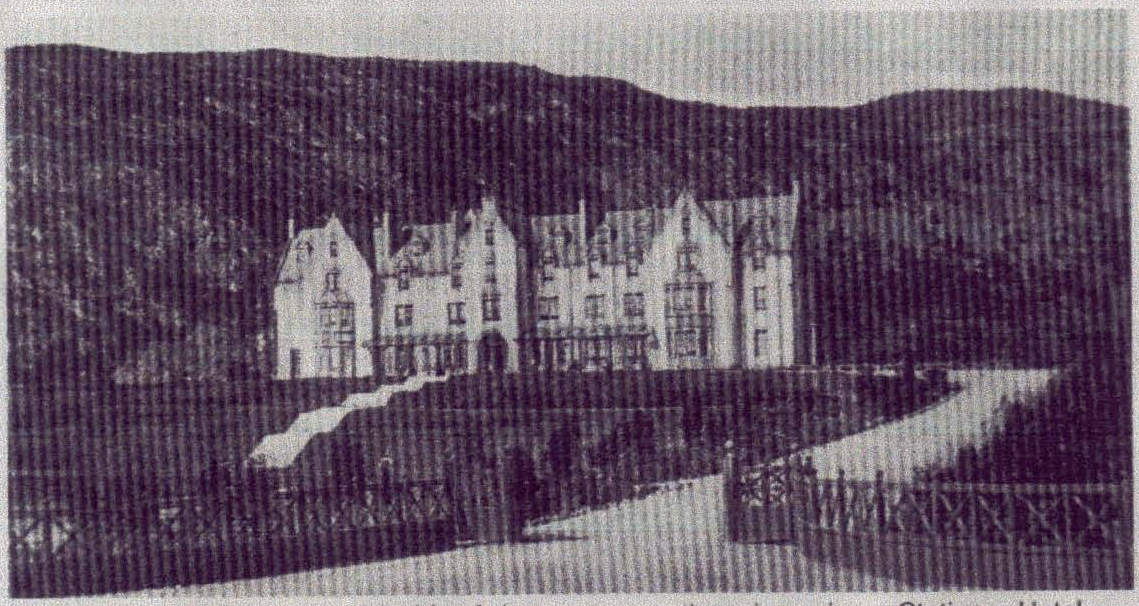
Latterly the new inn became well known as Aviemore House — a solid, square structure like a peel-tower, harled against the elements and slate-roofed. Sadly this key feature — the real reason for the early growth of Aviemore — was swept away in a road improvement in 1969. It plucked the historic heart out of the place.

The inn was at its busiest in the years of the stagecoaches. Telford's Great North Road had been constructed and at last there was a route fit for regular use by wheeled vehicles. The Caledonian coach was running between Inverness and Perth three times a week. Taking 17 hours, a welcome break was made at Aviemore where horses were changed. Lord Cockburn, a judge on circuit, liked to put up there. He adored Aviemore with its setting of mountains, rivers and woods.

Lord Cockburn was in dread of the railway coming to the Highlands, a project being discussed in the 1850s. Come it did, of course. In 1863, the Inverness & Perth Junction Railway opened between Inverness via Forres to Dunkeld and thus to Perth. Aviemore was chosen as one of the sections let to contractors for the construction of the line. They probably had a yard there for the supply of sleepers, fence posts and rails.

Men flocked to these points seeking employment, and once the job was complete, some would stay to work

The station frontage, again in 1953, before the railway cuts of a decade later. Travellers might face wearisome halts while trains were shunted, but there were welcome cups of tea at the rail bar.



The Glen Collection

A crowning glory of old Aviemore — the imposing Station Hotel, opened in 1901 and destroyed by fire in 1950.

permanently on the line or at the new station which was to become the core of the railway village.

Within two years, the Highland Railway had taken control — a company which continued until 1923 when the London, Midland & Scottish — the LMS — took over.

A map of the 1860s shows the little station, a modest villa for the stationmaster, and a row of three cottages for staff. Aviemore station was of such minor significance that it was lumped in with its northern neighbour Boat of Garten for valuation purposes.

The railway however became a growing force in the district, and in 1898 a new direct route from Aviemore to Inverness was opened. This went by Carrbridge and crossed the deep valleys of the Findhorn and Nairn over magnificent (and expensive) viaducts. Two lines now converged on the village and made it Aviemore Junction. An imposing new station was built with two signal cabins, a multitude of sidings and a shed big enough to house 12 locomotives.

The pre-First World War years saw a surge in tourist traffic at Aviemore. Land was feued by the Lairds of Grant, now the Earls of Seafield, for the building of houses. A series of handsome stone villas rose along the main road; most took their names from local hills — Craiggowrie, Ord Ban, Braeriach and Cairngorm among them. The "veesitors" from the Lowlands and farther afield came on summer holidays, taking a let for a month or longer while the local folk occupied a cottage (often made from old railway sleepers or corrugated iron) at the back — much in the same way as their ancestors had gone to summer shielings in the hills.

The rents were a welcome source of income, but the visitors found the facilities rather basic. There were few shops. In the 1870s, there was just a general store combined with a post and telegraph office. Local farmers also found house-letting profitable and an outlet for produce — milk, eggs, potatoes and honey — in sales to holiday-makers.

The railway however was the core of Aviemore. It was the major employer with about 130 staff ranging from the stationmaster, booking clerks, porters, signalmen, pointsmen and shunters, to lamp boys. Their numbers were boosted on the running side by the shed foreman, enginemen, firemen, fitters, steamraisers, coalmen and cleaners. There were also the carriage and wagon men to look after railway vehicles, and the permanent way staff to maintain the track.

In the first decade of this century, three neat terraces of six to eight railway company houses had been built. They were models of their kind, boasting proper bathrooms. Curiously, their gardens fronted the railway, possibly to give a pleasing view to passengers. Almost every railway worker was an incomer: from Forres, Strome Ferry, Blair Atholl or Wick, they came to Aviemore, taking great pride in being "on the railway".

Apart from its station, Aviemore's crowning glories were its hotels — the 100-bedroom Station Hotel of 1901 and the Cairngorm Hotel of 1904. The former attracted the titled and the wealthy. Open only in summer, it was an imposing place with fine grounds including lawn tennis courts, a croquet lawn and a nine-hole golf course. The big hotel gave much seasonal employment, especially to womenfolk, and brought welcome trade to the village shops. It was destroyed in a disastrous fire in 1950 and never rebuilt — an immense blow to Aviemore's prosperity.

As the Highland Railway owned extra ground, stances were let to shopkeepers. A group of wooden or galvanised iron huts appeared near the station, and the gibe that Aviemore was "just a shanty town" was heard from those who passed through. First in line was Sandy and Willie Campbell's — they sold boots and shoes; the laces were leather and the boots tackety. They were a fearsome pair sputtering derision at the government of the day through a mouthful of tacks.

Alongside was P. Grant, Chemist. Sammy Mearns was in charge. With his horn-rimmed glasses and keen wit, Sammy was an accomplished raconteur and few of the foibles of Aviemore folk or visitors went unobserved. He was also an able artist in watercolours, and many must be proud to own one of Sam's paintings of local scenes.

Then came Betsy's. The premises were meant to be a draper's, but as stock was so minimal "One Shirt" became the by-name of the shopkeeper, Miss Macdonald.

The bakery next door was a complete contrast. Frank and Pat McCook, ably assisted by Frank's wife, had the business and surely no better name for such a trade could have been devised. The shop was filled with the aroma of new-baked softies, cakes and biscuits.

The McCook brothers were Aviemore's aptly-named bakers. This 1943 photograph shows Frank in his Lovat Scouts uniform with Pat in flour-covered workwear.

Close by was Hay's garage — just a wooden shed with a couple of petrol pumps outside. Willie and Jock Hay were brothers, but they seemed as unlike as chalk and cheese — Willie always gentlemanly in suit, collar and tie with cloth cap, Jock bespectacled, in oily dungarees and usually wrestling with the innards of some recalcitrant car. From the shed in the 1950s a venerable bicycle (without gears) could be hired for 10s 6d a week.

Up the road, bachelor Dave Mackay also had a garage and cars for hire — giving Aviemore the status of two garages and marking it off as a touring centre of some note.

A focus of village life was Sam Macdonald's — combining the grocer's with the post office. Sam had come to Aviemore in 1916 and he soon became a key man in the place — playing in the football team, acting as master of ceremonies at dances, and chairing the village council. He is remembered with great affection. His shop had butter on marble slabs, sugar in big blue pokes, and loose biscuits weighed out by the pound.

Along the Great North Road, there was a general store whose owner was another Macdonald, but like many of the clan in Aviemore — none of whom appeared to be related — he

had a nickname, Speedie. It was said to be because of the considerable time he took to emerge from the back shop.

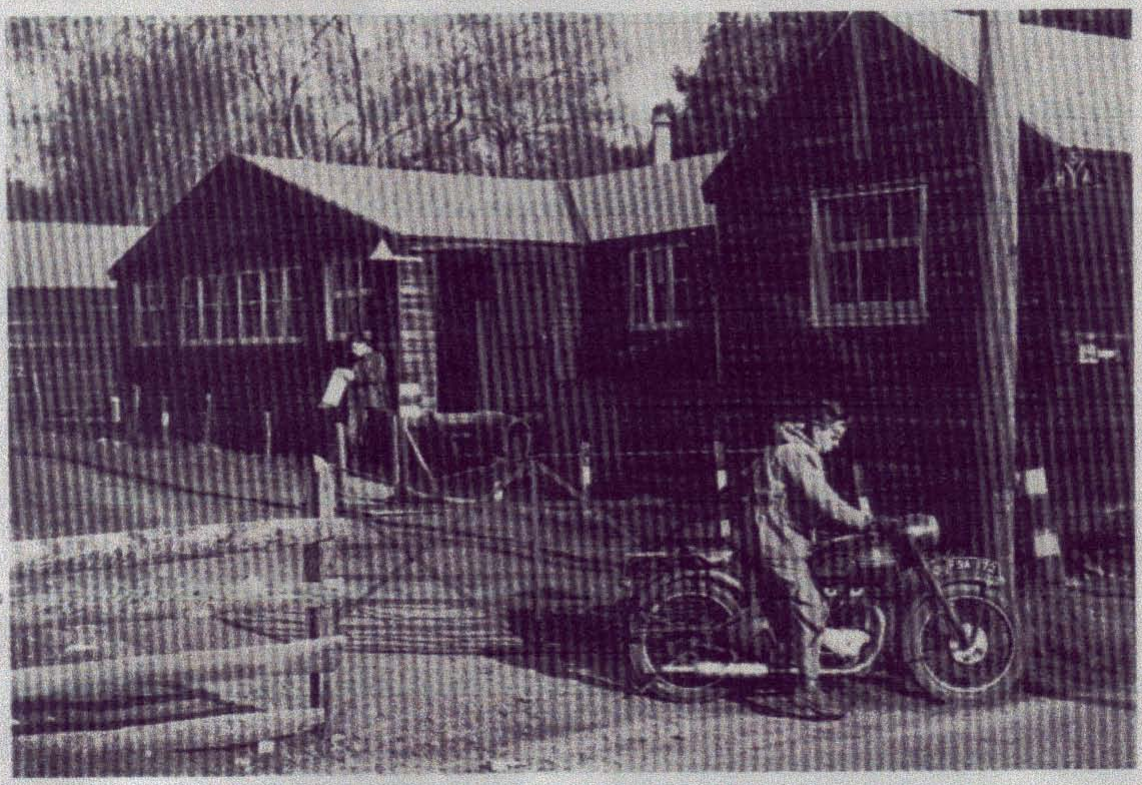
Visitors also became acquainted with Tommy Hogg of the Tweed Warehouse. Hailing from Selkirk, he had the soft brogue of the Borders and was invariably dressed in plus-fours. Latterly, he took over Speedie's premises. There were also two butchers, Kennedy's and Stewart's — a great advance on the 1900s when fresh meat was scarce and old Jock "Groat" and his wife went round with a basket of assorted cuts and eggs sold in four-pennyworths, the equivalent of the old groat coin.

In the inter-war years, a new type of visitor appeared — folk with little means, but a great liking for the outdoors who came for hiking, climbing and hill walking. The Scottish Youth Hostels Association opened its first Aviemore hostel in May 1933. It was just a contractor's wooden hut, but proved very popular as Aviemore was becoming the recognised base camp for the western Cairngorms. Conveniently near at hand, Mrs Lawrence's Pot Luck Tea-rooms were also built and soon became a village institution.

With a big wages bill to meet at the railway, banking was first done in the station waiting-room. Bank staff were sent up from Kingussie — by train, of course — to do business there. In 1935, Aviemore got its first Bank of Scotland.

The railwaymen and the lads from the farming community met in the bar at the back of the Station Hotel. It was for years the only licensed premises in Aviemore — now such outlets are abundant. Looking in around closing time would be Constable Duncan Mackenzie, who had moved to Aviemore from Skye just before the Second World War. He had his work cut out in the war years when Aviemore's population was swollen by Canadian lumberjacks, Indian troops, men of the 52nd Lowland Division, the Royal Army Service Corps, and Norwegians training as saboteurs. It taxed the accommodation at the police office, which had only one cell.

The inter-war years saw the arrival of hillwalkers and climbers who appreciated the low-cost accommodation at Aviemore's Youth Hostel, opened in 1933. This picture was taken in the mid-Fifties, when the premises had been enlarged.



I. W. Cumming

A favourite meeting place for Constable Mackenzie and the Aviemore "parliament" was the south signal cabin. It gave a panoramic view over the main road and the station — besides, signalmen were first to know of the happenings up and down the line. Folk paid little attention to the "Trespassers Will Be Prosecuted" notices, with young and old crossing the line there. Even Sammy, who was lame, limped across for a cuppie and a crack. Some children regularly walked over the tracks en route to the school in Rothiemurchus, now a visitor centre.

Beside the cabin was a siding known as Bessie's. She was a terror to enginemen — if the least smoke was made, threatening to deposit soot on her washing or just on her garden, Bessie was out vowing vengeance. No wonder she became known as Bessie Black Smoke.

Other parts of the Aviemore railway system also got names — Haggerty's Siding, for example, and no wonder, there were 11 in the family of whom seven were on the railway at one time.

Inevitably almost everyone had a nickname — railway folk were apt at finding a good fit. There was Adequate who frequently wrote in reports that his engine's steaming had not been adequate; Heedery Dan, a keen piper who practised his fingering on the loco regulator; Red Jock, one of the Macdonald tribe; the Slasher who was impetuous, especially in applying the brake, the Mole and a host of others.

When blizzards blew, and the big snow plough was at the ready, the Locomotive Foreman would send for "John L." Mackenzie, an engineman without fear of the drifts who'd always be prepared to batter his way through to Drumochter Summit and beyond. It was a task most enginemen detested, involving long hours and sweltering heat when a tarpaulin was wrapped over the cab to keep out the snow.

The railway women were a hard-working lot, too. Take Mrs Sutherland; her husband and four sons were all on the railway, mostly as guards. With three shifts in action, Mrs Sutherland — and her like — ran a 24-hour service of main meals and pieces. In addition, she took in summer visitors. It was doubted if Mrs Sutherland ever slept.

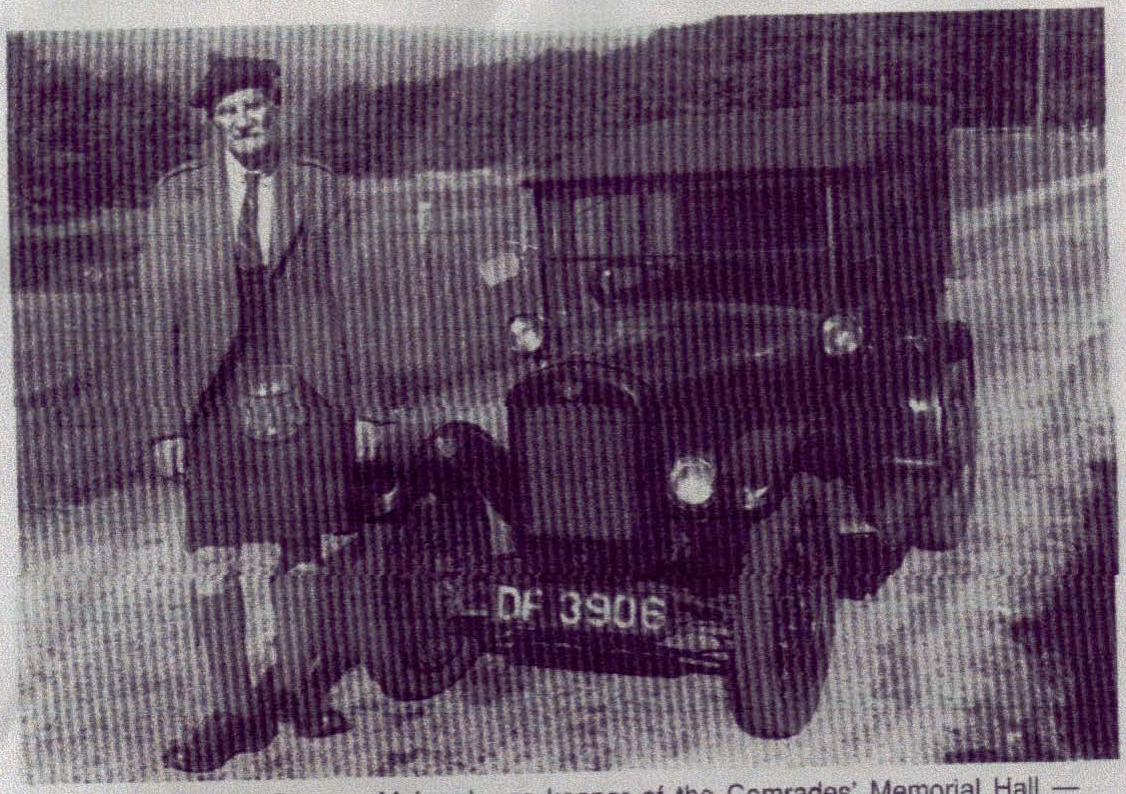
On wash days when the tank engine that shunted about the station went up alongside the railway terraces, the women came out with their pails to snatch boiling water from the injector overflow pipe. The scalding water, plus plenty of rubbing on the washboard, was the answer for greasy, soot-stained overalls.

There was a great sense of community. Everyone knew or was known by everyone else, and home-spun entertainment drew them together. Concerts and dances, whist drives and sales of work, the local drama group and travelling cinema shows gave great enjoyment. The Comrades' Memorial Hall was the centre of these activities. It was a First World War army hut bought for the community by a well-wisher and erected by the survivors from that appalling conflict.

Old Duncan McLeod, the hallkeeper, was kept busy. Invariably wearing the kilt, Duncan was a Gaelic speaker from Glenelg and an expert on the bagpipes. His wife had been a champion Highland dancer and something of a belle in her youth. They had an ancient Austin Seven tourer. One day as the car was about to start off from the station square, strong men among the young railway lads lifted it up by its back axle just enough to keep the wheels off the ground. In clouds of exhaust, it was going nowhere fast, much to the consternation of its owner.

For many years, there were two churches serving Aviemore, the stone-built St Andrew's of the Church of Scotland dating from 1901, and a Free Presbyterian establishment on the north edge of the village. Of galvanised iron, the latter was cheerfully decked out in red and white in contrast to the austerity within.

A severe blow to Aviemore came in 1963 with Dr Beeching's report on the railway industry. The old



Invariably kilted, Duncan McLeod was keeper of the Comrades' Memorial Hall — and owner of an ancient Austin Seven tourer that on one occasion got nowhere fast.

Highland main line via Forres was closed in 1968; Aviemore was shorn of its depot. The threat to employment and the local economy was intense, but tourism gave a window of opportunity.

Meanwhile Sir Hugh Fraser (later Lord Fraser of Allander), the successful retail store entrepreneur, was taking an interest in tourist development in the Highlands. Being a regular visitor to St Moritz, he envisaged the Swiss resort as a model. Touring the Highlands with a Scottish Office official, George Pottinger, his eye fell on Aviemore. After all, it was the nearest village to the ski slopes of Cairngorm.

The 1960s were the era of growth point developments. Local initiatives to replace the shack shoppies with a new shopping centre, and to create a motel complex to the north of the village, were overtaken by the grandiose Aviemore Centre scheme.

Soon new hotels, chalets and time-shares were proliferating. Housing developments, both public and private, spread across the fields. New shopping complexes rose on former railway land. A tide of incomers overwhelmed Aviemore as the population rose from 700 in 1961 to just short of 2500 nowadays.

As tourist numbers keep rising, Aviemore is trying to improve its image, though a proposal to replace the Cairngorm chairlift system has polarised opinion.

No longer is it possible to walk or cycle through the village and put a name on almost everyone. Aviemore first grew with the railway. Now its Highland character and matchless location have paid the price of progress.

Meantime, the railway employs only a handful of people. The porter's call, "Aa-viemore. Aa-viemore! Change here for Forres, Nairn an Elgin!" no longer echoes round the spacious station. The bustling tankie, splitting and making up trains or shunting long lines of goods wagons, has long fallen silent.

Main photography by A. E. Glen, the author's father

Thanks go to G. A. Dixon, for information on the Aviemore inn.