



Highlands line is small victory for model rail enthusiasts

Matthew Moore

It is one of Britain's great unbuilt train lines. For decades, Victorian engineers proposed an ambitious railway bisecting the Highlands, only for the plans to be abandoned because of practical difficulties, high costs and infighting between rival tycoons.

To this day, there is no direct train service from Fort William to Inverness, forcing passengers to take a tortuous seven-hour trip via Glasgow.

But where Victorian pioneers failed, a ragtag army of toy train enthusiasts has blazed a trail, uniting the Scottish settlements with the longest model railway ever constructed.

Stretching 73 miles across the harsh Highland landscape, up steep inclines and over streams, the track is nearly ten times the length of the previous record-holder. The feat required 11 lorry loads of specially designed PVC track, laid along the Great Glen Way by volunteers working into the night. Like the gangs of navvies who built the country's rail network in the 19th century, the model rail buffs slept by their line, moving camp each morning.

Dick Strawbridge and Claire Barratt will present a show on the longest model railway



The preposterous goal of this very British expedition? To race a Lilliputian gas-powered steam engine with a top speed of 2mph from Fort William to Inverness within 12 days, the deadline the team had been set for removing the track from the popular hiking route.

Led by "Colonel" Dick Strawbridge, a retired army officer and engineer, the volunteers devised ingenious solutions to obstacles, such as how to propel the engine, Silver Lady, up Neptune's Staircase, the longest staircase lock in Britain.

Crossing a canal required the help of a remote-control train ferry, and hills were climbed with pulley systems, using another engine's weight to help Silver Lady up the slope.

The eccentric attempt to recreate the golden era of railway construction, albeit on a smaller scale, was filmed for a new Channel 4 se-



Model train	Victorian rail
	Name of engine
Silver Lady	Steam engine
	Speed
2mph	Up to 70mph
	Length of engine
31cm	Around 40ft
	Time to complete route
12 days	Around two hours
	Powered by
Gas	Coal



The 73-mile track, laid by volunteers, runs along Loch Ness on the Glen Way

Rockstars laying down tracks

For a hobby dismissed as the preserve of old men in their attics, model trains have a rockstar following.

Rod Stewart

The 72-year-old has spent years assembling tracks at the top of his house. "Every three

years *Model Railroader* magazine puts me on their cover, which is better than *Rolling Stone*," he once said.

Roger Daltrey

The lead singer of The Who, 73, constructed a 45ft by 25ft display in his attic.

Neil Young

The Canadian folk rock singer, 72, recently sold his extensive collection of model trains for \$300,000 (£220,000) at auction. Other noted toy train enthusiasts include Eric Clapton and Phil Collins.

ries, *The Biggest Little Railway In The World*, which starts tomorrow.

The show has been created by the company behind *The Great British Bake Off*, and represents the latest attempt by television producers to make prime-time programming out of an unfashionable hobby. "By the end, I slightly forgot we were making a television programme," said Love Productions' Kieran Smith. "It was all about getting that bloody little train to Inverness."

The volunteers were recruited through appeals to the country's model train clubs and magazines. Surveys suggest that building model railways remains the second most popular hobby in Britain, behind angling. The team included IT workers, mortgage managers and former RAF servicemen, as well as Network Rail employees experienced at running full-scale rail projects. Progress during filming last June was

hampered by heavy rain, midges and accidents. On a couple of occasions passing cars ran over the line. "In terms of scale, you're talking about basically half of the trans-Siberian railway built in 12 days," said Strawbridge, 58, who co-presents with Claire Barratt.

A Fort William to Inverness rail link was first proposed in 1884 but met resistance from the owners of the Highland Railway, which ran a rival service south from Inverness on a more eastern route. In 1903 the Invergarry and Fort Augustus Railway opened along a 23-mile stretch of the proposed Fort William-Inverness line, but closed to passenger trains in 1933.

The record for longest model railway was previously held by the Northlandz museum in New Jersey, which boasts 100 trains across eight miles of track.

● *The Biggest Little Railway in the World* starts tomorrow at 8pm.