

The Cairn Gorm Funicular: Repair or Remove?

Description



Funicular at mid way passing loop complete with lack of stopping off point. Photo credit Alan Bratley

It has now been 9 months since the Funicular Railway was taken out of service but whether or not it will be repaired remains unknown.

The focus though of Highlands and Islands Enterprise is entirely on whether or not it can be repaired. The HIE website has this:

"HIE has consistently stated that its preferred option is to repair the structure and return the mountain railway to service which all investigations carried out so far indicate would be technically achievable"

and

"HIE and the Scottish Government agree that repair is the preferred option, in principle"

The question then isn't "could it be repaired" but rather "**should** it be repaired?."

In the years since the Funicular went into service is there evidence that the Cairn Gorm mountain business has prospered or failed?

Since 2002, the hill business has lost the Coire Na Ciste Chairlift, The West Wall Chairlift, The White Lady T-Bar, The Fiacail T-Bar and the Aonach Poma. These lifts represented approximately 40% of the uplift capacity and there have been no worthwhile new uplift installations made during the same time period. The hill has also lost the Ciste Base Station café and the Sheiling catering outlet with nothing new to replace them either.

There is also considerable evidence of dilapidation throughout the area which demonstrates that the business has not been generating the level of profitable revenue to maintain the assets. For example, the car park surfaces are in a very poor condition ([see here](#)) and the environs around the Daylodge are in such a state that the pathway around it has been closed to the public ([see here](#)).

In addition, the business has failed commercially in 2008 and again in 2018.

It is therefore very clear that the hill business has been a failure since the Funicular went into service. Is there any evidence that the responsibility for the failure rests with the Funicular?

Non skiing passenger numbers were predicted to be 160,000 per annum and this number was surpassed in the early years of service. The average was 174,935pa in the first 5 years of service [180,000: 182,000: 177,000: 164,046 and 171,406]. However in the last 5 years, prior to the failure of the funicular, the average number was just 130,990 [119,585: 127,092: 137,776: 138,712: and 131,788]. It's clear that non skiing passenger numbers have fallen significantly and are well below predictions. It should also be kept in mind that many of these passengers were not paying the full fare. Coach parties receive large discounts and 2 for 1 offers on Ipson and Groupon bolster the number but are also uneconomic.

In the time period since the Funicular was brought into service the summer tourism business in Strathspey has increased considerably with many adventure tourism businesses having been set up. During the time when numbers in Strathspey have been increasing, the numbers using the Funicular have been decreasing.

Will repairing the Funicular be likely to reverse that trend?

Proposals to spend circa £2m on a Ptarmigan building extension and revamp are ill advised. While Funicular numbers may be bolstered initially they will quickly drop off as the novelty wears away, just as it did in the early years. Repeating the mistakes of the past would be foolish and will be likely to condemn the hill business to ongoing failure.

The Funicular itself has in-built inefficiencies. The passing loop is at the track mid-point (top photo) but that isn't where the upload/download point has been located. The train has therefore to make two stops rather than one whenever uploading/downloading passengers outwith the top and bottom stations. That is hugely inefficient and greatly reduces the carrying capacity per hour.

In addition, the track design is such that its subject to being covered by snowdrifts which have to be cleared by hand before the Funicular can operate. The track is actually lower than the Home Road at a

point not far above the Daylodge Station and unsurprisingly it gets drifted over there fairly easily.

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The Funicular Track being cleared of snowdrifts by hand at a point not far above the Daylodge. Pho

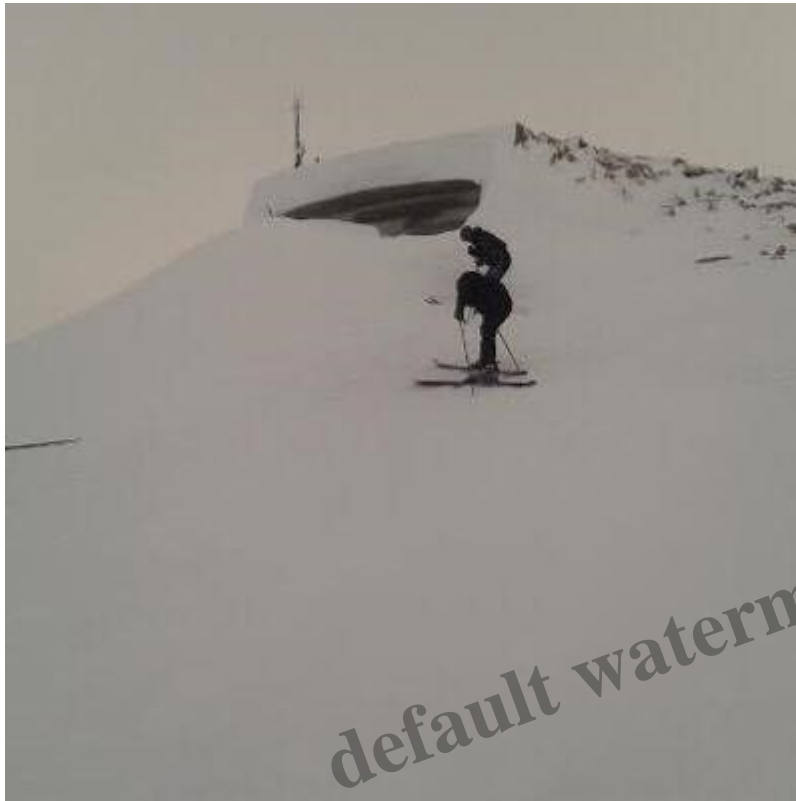
The track being covered by snowdrifts is something that occurs more frequently than most people might realise and it's quite clear that the structure itself traps snow and will always be subject to these difficulties. Its precisely because of issues with drifting snow that funicular railways in the Alps tend to be underground.

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The Funicular track covered by snowdrifts above the M1 loading area. Photo Credit Alan Bratney.

It is also well known that the tunnel mouth, which is located near the top, can have as much as 7 metres of drifted snow in front of it that has to be hand dug out before the funicular can operate.



Almost 7 metres of snow in front of the tunnel mouth.
Photo Credit Alan Bratney.

The significance of these operational inefficiencies should not be under-estimated. They lead to cost increases but no corresponding increase in revenues. Late opening also leads to customer frustration and has a negative impact on repeat business.

All of these negatives have led to a collapse in the Cairn Gorm share of the Scottish Snowsports market as customers have drifted away from Cairn Gorm and gone to the other resorts. The data doesn't lie and it shows that the long term average market share at CairnGorm was 40.6% in the 10 years to 2013. That share had collapsed to just 23.6% in the 2017/18 season.

The question that HIE and the Scottish Government would seem to be avoiding is this: will repairing the Cairn Gorm Funicular remove the in-built inefficiencies and lead to a profitable outcome?

Those who favour the introduction of Mountain Biking on Cairn Gorm should know that the Funicular is unsuited to the carriage of bikes due to capacity issues and repairing it will not change that fact.

There has already been commentary on the proposal, put forward by the SE Group, to construct an Alpine Coaster on the Fiacail Ridge. The objective here is not to discuss that proposal but it is clear that not all passengers who might use a Coaster would be new business and it is possible that having it there may reduce the numbers using the Funicular further thereby making it even less financially

viable.

There has been no public consultation to determine what the customers would like as an outcome despite the fact that it is customers who will ultimately decide the future success or failure of the Cairn Gorm Mountain business.

On 3 July 2019 HIE had this to say:

".....we must look to the future long-term and ensure that local people have a meaningful opportunity to put forward views that will inform a future masterplan....."

Whether or not the Funicular should be repaired is a major decision that will have long-term repercussions for the hill business and the local economy. To date, there has been no consultation with local people about its future. HIE should also be aware that the wider community has a big stake in the outcome too. If the wrong decisions are made they will continue to avoid coming to Cairn Gorm.

Customers have made their views about Cairn Gorm and the Funicular Railway very clear, by going elsewhere. The drop in visitor numbers should tell HIE that if people are to be encouraged to return to Cairn Gorm, a dramatic change of strategic direction is necessary.

The evidence strongly suggests that the Funicular Railway is a financial burden on the operating company and that the public must have a say about whether it should have a future or not.

What should happen now?

1. The Scottish Government should stop listening to HIE because they have consistently failed to do the right things at Cairn Gorm
2. Local and wider consultation about whether or not the Funicular should be repaired needs to be undertaken without delay.

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. Cairn Gorm
2. HIE
3. Local communities
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