

NOSAS Historical Routes through the Highlands
No 2. The Old Road from Clachan Church, Loch Broom to Dundonnell, Little Loch Broom



OS Explorer map - 436, **NGR** – NH 840182 to NH 115857, **Ascent** - 450m, **Length** – 9.5kms, **Grade** – difficult

Two hundred years ago this route was the main overland route connecting two coastal communities in the Parish of Lochbroom, one of the largest parishes in the Highlands. Clachan Church was its Parish Church and the route over the hill to Dundonnell is sometimes referred to as the “Kirk road” or the “Coffin road”, there is however no documentary evidence to support this. There are several accounts of travellers who traversed the route in the 18th and 19th centuries, but there were also other routes at this time – a ferry from Ullapool to Alltnaharry and then a track over the hill to Dundonnell and c.1849 a road along the line of the present A832 from Braemore to Dundonnell was built. This road was known as a “Destitution Road” its construction providing work for the local population who had been affected by the potato famine of 1846/47.

The majority of the land traversed by the old road is on the Dundonnell Estate, but the steep slopes above Clachan Church are still “glebe” land owned by the church and the steep slopes above Croftown are part of the Inverbroom Estate which was owned briefly by John Fowler in the 19th century (see box)

The Route. The route crosses high hill-ground and can be a difficult undertaking especially in winter. It can be made circular by descending to Clachan Church after 3kms. The track is well worn and there is evidence of it having had significant construction particularly on the steep slopes above Croftown and Clachan, the 1st Edition OS map of 1875 has it annotated as “bridle track”. It may be that the original road took a steep line directly from the church but the present track starts at the settlement of Croftown 1km south of the church. Park at the cross roads just east of Croftown. The path has had recent reconstruction and is clearly marked around the settlement. Above the settlement it climbs steeply, first heading south and then



turning NE, for 1.5kms. It is roughly 1 to 1.5m width and there are obvious sections of construction. At NH 16865 84244 a culvert is crossed and near the top the track has been cleared down to slabby bedrock. Fine panoramic views are seen at this point as the track contours around the hillside. After a stock fence and a short descent a substantially made dam is crossed; note its construction of local stone, a slabby schist which laminates easily (“flag-like” stone is mentioned by Knox in 1786 – see box). The remains of several other turf and stone dams, some of them very wasted are nearby; they are on glebe (church) land and were once part of a hatchery for rearing fish to stock the rivers. A short diversion of 300m to visit them is suggested although the “going” is rough; a building used as a “fishing hut”, now a ruin, at Alltan Leachan should be included (see box). The walk can be made circular by descending directly from the ruin; a track heads NE and zig-zags steeply down to the Church. Return to the old road and continue NW to the watershed (410m) crossing from the glebe land to Dundonnell estate. There are fine views towards An Teallach and after 4kms of gradual descent down the small glen of the Allt a Chairn birch woodland is entered. Thereafter the track descends steeply towards Dundonnell House.

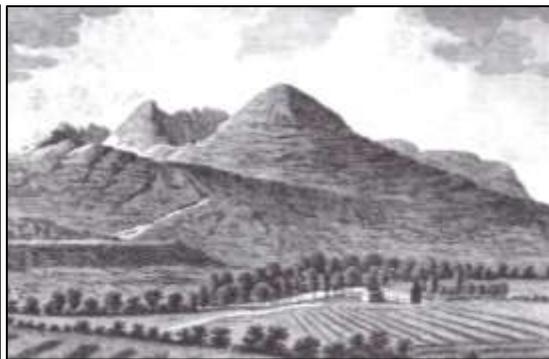


Clachan Church, Lochbroom - Canmore ID 12125 at NGR NH 17707 84788 The present church was built in 1817 near to its predecessor which is depicted on a plan of 1793 with a different orientation to the present one. The NSA (1835) reports that the church “affords accommodation for 1200 sitters”, but in recent years this has been reduced to just 300. The church is remarkable in that it is almost unaltered since it was built. The austere rectangular stone building is of two storeys and has galleries around three sides. The simplicity of the interior is impressive with pulpit against the end wall and the central floor space occupied by two long parallel communion tables enclosed by a double box pew. The church lost much of its congregation as the population shifted to Ullapool, it was also affected by the Disruption of 1843 when many left to form the Free Church. It was closed only recently in 2016. The oldest named and dated stones in the surrounding graveyard are two plaques which bear the dates 1724 and 1732; they are mounted in the wall of a MacKenzie vault near the centre of the graveyard, this enclosure may in fact be the wing of the old church of 1793

Travellers –

“A Tour through the Highlands of Scotland and the Hebride Isles in 1786”, John Knox - “My next stage (*he was travelling north from Dundonnell*) was to the head of Great Loch Broom in which I was accompanied by Mr Mackenzie junior. The ascent from the house of Dundonald (*sic*) cannot be less than two miles in a gradual rise.....This ridge of mountains fills up the space between the two lochs and is composed of stone resembling flags which may be found useful to the British (*Fisheries*) Society.....Having arrived at the edge of the mountains on the north side where the road is carried almost perpendicularly from the summits the view of Loch Broom and a track of champaign country at the head of it with two winding streams falling into the loch from opposite directions afford one of the finest landscapes in nature..... At this place is a church, a manse and a school. Here the trustees at Edinburgh purchased 12 acres of good land on which they erected a large house (the present Inverlael House) for carrying on spinning and weaving; but this design proved abortive through, it is alleged, the misconduct of those who were entrusted with the management of it.

“A Tour of the Highlands in 1803”, James Hogg (*The Ettrick Shepherd*) - We spent a day in viewing the strath (*Dundonnell*), and to have a better general view of the estate Mr George and I climbed to the top of the ridge betwixt the two Loch Brooms.....It is an excellent pastoral estate and the vale of the strath is pleasant and fertile. It hath plenty of natural wood in its upper parts and the laird hath beautified the vicinity of his mansion house with extensive plantations.....His (*Dundonnells*) glens are so crammed full of stout able-bodied men and women that the estate under the present system must have enough to do in maintaining them. The valleys are impoverished by perpetual cropping.... Interestingly Pont c1590 shows significantly more woodland along the route than there is today

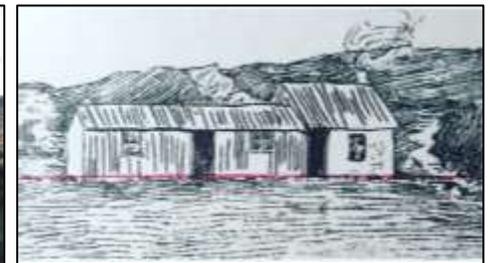


Left – extract from Ponts map of 1590 and above “Dundonnell” from Pennants “Tour of Scotland 1772”

Sir John Fowler, was well known for his major engineering works which included London’s Metropolitan Railway and the Forth Bridge, John Fowler purchased, in 1865 and 1867, estates totalling 40 000 acres at Braemore and Inverbroom. He enjoyed them for over three decades. His role as a Highland landowner was one which he took seriously and he endeared himself to the people of the district by treating them with respect and civility. During this period he applied his engineering skills to his new house at Braemore and developing the estate for the enjoyment of his family and distinguished guests.

Associated Archaeology

Above Croftown the track ascends steep grassy fertile slopes which have clearly seen much activity – a sheepfank is on the left and nearby the oval mounded shape of at least one shieling hut, indicating seasonal migration to upland pasture. In the upper reaches of the two burns on glebe land the remains of two dams are crossed one at Lochan Dubh, NH 1654 8457, and a much smaller one at NH 1639 8457. Other dams are nearby, one at NH 1653 8477 and one at NH 1635 8477 the narrow outlet of Loch an Fhiona. A little lower to the east a ruined building, Alltan Leacach is worth a detour. This building at NH 1660 8479 is a complex site and appears to have gone through at least two different phases; it is marked on the 1st edition OS map of 1875 as a ruin but local knowledge has it as occupied by the minister when he let out the manse to “fishing tenants” in the 1920s. Muriel Foster (*see box*) visited at this time (*see sketch*) and there is evidence in her diary to suggest that the original building at the site along with the dams was a hatchery for rearing fish; it was almost certainly established during the development of the Dundonnell Estate as a sporting estate possibly in the 1860s; if so it is one of the earliest on record. Two areas of prehistoric activity are located on the hillside above Dundonnell House. The first is on the 300m contour; it has two round houses, Canmore ID: 12121, at NH 128858 and ID: 132068, at NH 128855. Lower down, around the 200m contour, there are three more round houses and several field clearance cairns at NH 120856 – Canmore ID: 12123.



Left - the ruin of the building on the Alltan Leacach looking SE, and above Muriel Foster's sketch of the same building in the 1920s

The Mackenzies of Dundonnell This family was loosely connected with the Mackenzies of Cromartie holding the lands of Dundonnell from 1680. The first Dundonnell House was built in 1703 by Kenneth Mackenzie, 1st of Dundonnell who died in 1723. The house was a typical laird’s house but it was doubled in size in 1769 with the addition of a second house alongside by Kenneth 3rd of Dundonnell. From the 1840s the estate was let for hunting shooting and fishing with significant development taking place in the 1860s. It is presently owned by Sir Tim Rice, the broadcaster and lyricist

Muriel Foster (1884 – 1963) Muriel Foster spent many days fishing on the Dundonnell Estate in the 1920s. She was an artist and a keen naturalist from Wiltshire in the south of England. She kept a fishing diary “Days on Sea, Loch and River” which was published in 1979. The diary gives details of what, where, when and with whom she caught fish. It has beautifully drawn illustrations and includes a small sketch (*above*) of the “hut” along with mention of “the hatchery ponds on the glebe land”