

NOSAS Historical Routes through the Highlands

No 1. The Old Drove Road from Aultguish Inn to Little Garve Bridge, sometimes known as “the Fish Road”



OS Explorer map – 436, **NGR** - NH 351705 to NH 396629 **Length** - 12kms, **Ascent** – 250m, **Grade** - Difficult

The Route

A road, funded by the British Fisheries Society, was constructed between 1792 and 1797 to provide a land link for the newly established settlement of Ullapool on the West Coast to the “outside” world. The road had a short lifespan being replaced by a road designed by Thomas Telford in 1840. The major part of the old road is in its original state but it is neglected and lacking in maintenance. It has not been altered or re-used as an estate or forest road although a section in the south part has been destroyed by forest operations. The route is well-known for being wet and boggy; for those wanting a relatively dry crossing it is best avoided in the winter months.

The Aultguish Inn (*above in the 1930s*) is the starting point. Follow a faint path on the east bank of a small burn southwards noting the wasted abutments of a bridge after 300m.

You are now on the line of the old road. Go through a gate in the fence on the left and follow the line of the road in a southeasterly direction gradually gaining height. At first the road is difficult to identify but it soon becomes more obvious and after 500m is easily followed. The section over the watershed is well defined and pleasant walking; here, on the higher ground, the road is generally about 3m in width and bounded



on one or both sides by occasional boulders. On the lower wetter stretches the road disappears altogether, but its line can be easily seen ahead. This is remote wild country with distant views. After 4kms a forestry plantation is entered; it is boggy at first but gradually the descent is made on a good track. The lower part of the track becomes overgrown after crossing a modern forest road and it is necessary to make a detour towards Silver Bridge and then the old Telford road to Little Garve Bridge. The name “fish road” is a misnomer, no evidence of the road being used to transport fish has been found and surely it would have been easier to send the fish from Ullapool by boat; it is possible that the name was adopted simply because the road was funded by the British Fisheries Society. It was not long before the fish began to desert Loch Broom and the road fell into disrepair. This old road however resorted to its original purpose continuing in use as a drove road for many years.

Brief History

The road was constructed between 1792 and 1797 to provide a land link for the newly established settlement of Ullapool on the West coast to the East coast. A route between Contin and Ullapool had almost certainly existed for many centuries; in the 17th and 18th century it was one of the drove roads from the NW to the cattle markets in the east and south. Haldane, in “The Drove Roads of Scotland” has:

“Pennant in 1772 noted that in the Loch Broom district the sale of black cattle to drovers from as far south as Craven in Yorkshire was the chief support of the people. For these the only practicable route to the south was by Strath Garve to Muir of Ord.....and many of these (the cattle from Lewis landed at Poolewe and Aultbea) went up the valley of the Gruinard Riverand so by hill tracks to join either the road from Ullapool to Dingwall or that from Achnasheen to Garve.... From Braemore the beasts were driven east to Garve and Dingwall but two deviations from the main road were used by the drovers.....one of these turned due south from the main road near Aultguish and crossed the forest of Corriemoillie to Garve so shortening the distance and keeping the beasts on the soft ground where grazing was available. The other short cut left the Ullapool Garve road near Inchbae Lodge and crossing the saddle between Ben Wyvis and Little Wyvis re-joined the road to Dingwall at Achterneed.”

Even in 1755 Captain John Forbes in his Report (*on Coigach*) for the Commissioners of Forfeited Estates says;

“The roads to and through this country (Coigach) may be reckoned amongst the worst in the Highlands of Scotland, being mountainous rocky and full of stones, and no bridges upon the rivers, so that nothing but necessity makes strangers resort here and for the great part of the year it is almost inaccessible the making of a road from Loch Broom to Dingwall would contribute greatly towards the civilizing of this country by reason of intercourse and trade that could be carried on twixt the east and west coasts which is at present impracticable”

John Knox travelling in the Highlands in 1786 on behalf of the British Fisheries Society found no roads in Sutherland, Caithness and Ross-shire. Ullapool was established by the British Fisheries Society between 1788 and 1790. Knox’s criticisms were not without results, for a few years later the British Fisheries Society decided, with Parliaments support, to undertake the construction of a road from Contin to Ullapool. The road was surveyed by George Brown in 1790 and the cost of building it estimated at £8,000; this the government considered excessive. Kenneth Mackenzie of Torridon offered to undertake the work influenced by “the avidity for labour and the necessities of the poor” and in the Spring of 1792 a contract to make 40 miles of road, at fourpence to eightpence a yard according to the nature of the ground and a large number of bridges was entered into. This road was completed in 1797 at a total cost of £4,582.....the road fell quickly into disrepair..... only 12 years later Telford and his colleagues were faced with a demand for renewal (*New Ways through the Glens” ARB Haldane 1962*)

By 1835 the NSA for the Parish of Loch Broom has:

About 40 years ago a road was constructed at a great expense from Dingwall to Ullapool But the line chosen was so absurd and the execution so wretched that the road has been for many years not only useless but dangerous to foot passengers and riders on horseback, and to wheel carriages while several of the principal bridges are carried away or threatened with being so. A new road with the requisite bridges would be an immense improvement

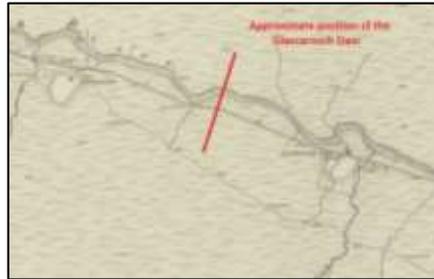
Telford's new road, which took the line of the present road, was completed in 1840.

The Map Evidence

A map (NRS RHP11593) of the "Proposed road from Garve to Ullapool" by George Brown dated 1790 (below) has the line of the old "Fish Road" traversing the high ground from the approximate location of the Glascarnoch Dam to Corrimoillie and Little Garve Bridge – a dashed line which is probably the line of the drove road runs alongside

The only road on the Arrowsmith map of 1807 (right) and the Thomsons map of 1830 takes the same line as the one on the 1790 map.

The First Edition OS survey of 1875 has both the original road and the newer Telford road which takes a line similar to that of the present road along the glen to Garve. Aultguish Inn is in its present position on this map, but there is also a roofed building in the position of the building on the Thomson map. This location has now been flooded by the building of the Glascarnoch Dam but the ruins of a building can be seen at periods of low water. This was almost certainly the old Aultguish Inn used by the drovers?



Top - Arrowsmith map from 1807 Middle - OS First Edition survey with the position of the Glascarnoch Dam Bottom - Extract from George Brown's plan of the "Proposed road from Garve to Ullapool" dated 1790 (NRS RHP11593)

Associated Archaeology

The farmstead of Kirkan NGR NH 368696 situated 2kms to the SE of the Aultguish Inn is worth a detour. It is a pleasant green oasis with outstanding views towards Ben Wyvis. Brown's map of 1790 (left) has it as "Carkine" with 5 buildings and rig and furrow cultivation surrounding; a list of householders dated 1798 has Alexander Grant, tenant, there and Kenneth MacLennan in his "Memories of Strathvaich, 1992", has James MacTavish, sheepfarmer in 1825. MacLennan also tells us that:

"There is the ruin of an old limekiln above Kirkan House where there is a small outcrop of limestone"
And "The excise officers found one (an illicit still) on Kirkan and destroyed it. At the time there were men working on the Black Bridge, who spotted the excise officers travelling along the road in a horse and trap. As soon as the officers were out of sight a man ran across country to raise the alarm. As a result some of the whisky was saved."

The verdant green landscape provides proof of the limestone but no evidence of the small outcrop of limestone and the limekiln has been located. The remains of the illicit still bothy, NH 37149 69666, nestle beside the burn 300m due east of the farmstead.



Above - Kirkan farmstead NH 368696 looking towards Ben and below the illicit still bothy on the Feith Bhaite



Little Garve Bridge

This fine old bridge, on the old Contin to Poolewe road, was probably built in the 1760s by Caulfield, General Wades successor. It crosses the River Blackwater at a picturesque narrow part of the river and is well worth a visit. The old Ullapool road left the Contin-Poolewe road after crossing the bridge a few 100metres to the west. Both roads were to have short lives, falling victims to the Highland weather and lack of maintenance.