

## NOSAS Historical Routes through the Highlands No 4 The Tollie Path, from Poolewe to Slattadale



**NGR** - NG 859789 to NG 888723

**Ascent** 220m, **Length** – 8.5kms

**Grade** - moderate

A well-trodden path starts 2kms south of Poolewe and follows the line of an old military road south to Slattadale on Loch Maree.

The old road marked on the Arrowsmith map of 1807(right) is part of a much longer military road linking Dingwall to Poolewe which was planned by William Caulfield. It was started in 1763 but never completed. Today

much of the path on the Tollie part of the road has had attention from modern “footpath builders” and many of the features of the old road have been destroyed or washed away, but the central part over the higher ground (right), is relatively untouched and some of the original features can still be seen. Start at a bend in the A832 2kms south of Poolewe where there is a car park. The path ascends gradually gaining 150m in the first 2kms. It is rough and stony in places and crosses a few burns but the two largest have been bridged and should not pose problems. There is little evidence of the old road here but at an altitude of 200m the path reaches a small loch and thereafter as it traverses a low pass between rocky summits more of the original old road is evident. It is cleared of boulders and worn to natural with many stretches down to bedrock. It is generally 1 to 1.5m in width and there are several cairns but some of



Cairns, but some of these may be recent. The descent of 2.5kms towards Loch Maree gives magnificent views of the loch, its islands and the mountains of Slioch and Torridon, although the power line which has been present alongside from the outset of the walk detracts! An unfinished millstone (below left) HER ID: MHG51267 lies abandoned beside the road on the descent to Loch Maree at NGR NG 87081 75901. It is roughly circular, has a diameter of 1.6m, a thickness of 10 to 15cms and a central hole showing evidence of multiple drilling. A recessed scoop with a large split laminated rock nearby is probably the quarry site for the stone. Lower down, at NGR NG 87853 75348, there is a broken culvert (below right), almost certainly one of the original. The last 3kms along the shore of the loch are rough and undulating and the many drains and culverts appear to be modern. The route is highly recommended for its middle section and for its rewarding scenery



### Brief Historical Background

Poolewe was an important place in the early days when most travelling was done by water. The settlement was at the head of Loch Ewe and Loch Maree, 2kms to the SE, provided a route eastwards. Poolewe is in the Parish of Gairloch, the village of Gairloch being 9kms to the south. The lands of Gairloch were granted to Hector Mackenzie in 1494 and a house, Flowerdale, was built in 1738. There were no built roads around Gairloch and Poolewe at that time, Captain Burt writes in 1730 that he came regularly to Gairloch ....“*The post runner came from Dingwall by Strath Braan and Glen Dochartie to the head of Loch Maree then along the east side of the loch via Letterewe to Poolewe and thence if necessary to Flowerdale*”.

In 1756 a regular postal packet from Poolewe to Stornoway was set up (Haldane, 1971) and the village of Poolewe thrived, Pennant in 1772 reports: “*(it) is the station of a government packet that sails regularly from hence to Stornoway in Lewis .....This is a spot of much concourse; for here terminates the military road which crosses from the east to the west sea*”. John Knox who toured the Highlands and Islands in 1786 reported that he sailed from Stornoway to Poolewe in a small unseaworthy vessel used for the transport of cattle. A road, surveyed and planned by Major William Caulfield, was started in 1763. Knox in 1786 says that it was “*never completed apart from a section at Loch Maree*” – it would seem that it was poorly maintained. Haldane (1962) tells us that “*in 1767 Caulfield was succeeded by Colonel Skene and the Treasury took advantage of the change to try to check the growth of what was proving (to be) a heavy...charge on public funds..... The roads had been*

*made largely with unskilled labour many of the earlier ones at high speed.....it was inevitable that the cost of their repair and upkeep was to rapidly increase". Haldane (1962) also has "A road from Contin to Poolewe first appeared in the records about the year 1760. It seems to have been kept in some sort of repair during the next 20 years but after that there is no reference to work on it and in the paper which Sir Kenneth Mackenzie read to the Inverness Scientific Society in 1899 he records that Lady Seaforth on her way to Lewis could only get as far as Loch Achanault 15 miles from Contin where her coach became a complete wreck"*

From 1793 there were various proposals for a new road from Achnasheen but nothing seems to have come of them (see "Plan of intended road from Poolewe to Achnasheen" dated 1793 NRS RHP11599 and "Plan of a proposed road between Achnasheen and Loch Maree" dated 1811 NRS RHP11675). In 1803 Parliament set up "the Commission for Highland Roads and Bridges" and by 1819 a road from Achnasheen to Kinlochewe had been constructed. A boat then took travellers to Slattadale (for Gairloch) or Tollie (for Poolewe). In 1837 the Rev James Russell was indignant, in his NSA he writes: "*When other parishes received large grants for conducting public roads through their whole length, this parish..... was completely neglected. It was not until 1847 that a road along the south side of Loch Maree was built and even then it needed the potato famine of 1846 and the driving force of the Dowager Lady Mackenzie of Gairloch to initiate it. Half the cost was provided by the Destitution Committee, half was collected by Lady Mackenzie and the work was done by the local crofting tenants. This and several other roads in the area became known as a "Destitution road".*

**Droving in Wester Ross** – From the early 17<sup>th</sup> century the rearing of cattle for export became important to the Scottish economy. After the Union of 1707 the demand for Highland beef from England and the South increased and during the Napoleonic Wars it extended to salt beef for the army. Droving was the easiest and cheapest way to transport animals to the Trysts of Crieff and Falkirk and later to that at Muir of Ord after 1820. From early days cattle rearing and reiving had been part of the culture of the Highlander. The drovers of the 17<sup>th</sup> century learned their trade from their forefathers, thus the illegal reivers became the legitimate drovers. The beasts carried themselves to market but they were slow and could only travel c10 miles per day before they had to rest and graze overnight. Many of the "inns" in the Highlands today were once used by the drovers and are evidence of overnight "stances" - Kinlochewe, Achnasheen, Aultguish, Struie are well known, but there are many others which are now in ruins eg Fane (on the Dundonnell road), Badinluchie (near Achanalt) and Luib Gargan (SW of Achnasheen).

Drovers did not rear the cattle themselves they took them from others and collected more as they went along, there are some accounts of droves at Drumochter being up to a mile in length. Haldane 1997 reports that 500 head of cattle were exported from the Parish of Gairloch but in the Outer Islands of Lewis and Harris the industry was on a much larger scale. The NSA of 1845 for Stornoway records that near the town "*there is a square mile of moor enclosed for a cattle tryst where several thousand head are exposed for sale and at least 2,000 change hands in 2 days; from 20 to 30 drovers come from the Mainland and some from England".* These cattle were mainly landed at Poolewe but also at Gairloch, Aultbea, Gruinard and Ullapool. From here the droves followed a variety of routes eastwards to the tryst at Muir of Ord. Haldane, 1997, again "*From Poolewe the island cattle together with those of the Parish of Gairloch appear to have followed the N shore of Loch Maree to Kinlochewe and Achnasheen while many of those landed at Aultbea and Gruinard went up the valley of the Gruinard river past Loch na Shellag and so by hill tracks to join either the road from Ullapool to Dingwall or that from Achnasheen to Garve"*



**Associated Archaeology** – There is very little archaeology associated with the road; the few enclosures in the vicinity of the start of the walk are hardly worth the diversion. But at the village of Poolewe the ruined Inverewe Church (Canmore ID: 11977) may have been the site of a pre-Reformation church or even a monastic institution; a Pictish symbol stone is in the burial ground. A late Bronze Age hoard (Canmore ID: 11986) and a number of hut circles in the area are testament to it being long settled. And at NG 8613 7977 on the N side of the River Ewe the Red Smiddy Ironworks (Canmore ID 11940) were probably set up in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. At Slattadale a flanged bronze axehead (Canmore ID 11963), was found at NG 880 720 in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and is now in Gairloch Museum. Also at Slattadale the Garavaig bloomeries (Canmore ID 11965), at NGR NG 894 713, no longer extant, were probably among the earliest of the ancient Gairloch ironworks. No date can be assigned to them but the Dixon (1886) suggests that they may be Iron Age.

### The road south towards the Bridge of Grudie and Kinlochewe

South of Slattadale, the line of the old 1763 road can be followed for a further 13kms, from Talladale (?Targan) NG 922704 to Drochaidh Bhanabhaig, NG 990663. It exists as a worn track although it is overgrown in places and for a short 3km stretch, south of Bridge of Grudie, has been overlaid by the Destitution road of 1847. The old bridge of Grudie (NG 96661 67764 - Canmore ID 330638 - HER ID: MHG55089) still exists and is one of two bridges crossing the River Grudie at a narrow rocky gorge (photo right). The old bridge is at right angles to the river whereas the modern road crosses obliquely, it is 4.5m in width and has a span of 5.5m. Dixon (who is not altogether reliable) writing in 1886 says that the bridge incorporates the previous bridge built on the military road of 1763 "*there was a bridge at Gruidih on "General Wades" road (ie that of 1763) When the new road was made (in 1847) it doubled in width".* Access to the underside of the bridge is difficult because of the rocky nature of the gorge but the external arches on both sides and the two parapets were different in construction from each other, so it would appear that Dixon is correct in what he says. From Grudie Bridge the road goes south for 400m, following the river initially, and then turns east until it reaches steeper ground where it contours around the hill-side running parallel to the new road until it reaches Drochaid Bhanabhaig. There are revetments and some stone pitching to be seen. The road continues on the other side of the burn for a while and then only at intervals before reaching Taagan, where it has probably been built over by the new road.



### Bibliography

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