A walk on the beach at the southern tip of Rosneath Peninsula, Argyll & Bute.

The air, the water and the land, and sadly, the litter.


A tiny part of Scotland – with so much to offer.
The sky was a bland but beautiful shade of pale blue interrupted only by occasional and ever changing clumps of fluffy topped white and grey clouds, constantly modifying themselves into slowly moving and ever changing shapes, of curly topped travellers heading to some unknown destination across the horizons. The airborne islands of pearly white seemed endless in their seemingly mysterious source as the continued their journey – appearing from somewhere – and disappearing to – another place.

The skyward scene is only occasionally interrupted by the apparently motiveless flight of a bird or flock of them, sometimes alone but on other occasions as a flight of well-meaning direction, especially at some specific spot on the beach where they will swoop down as if with a single mind, perhaps sensing a good spot for lunch, or just taking a chance on one. Further out, especially if the sea is flat, the expert divers of gannet, tern or cormorant will streak down and disappear in a little flash of sparkling water, to erupt again some distance away, and if they were lucky, as they usually are – with their beak held quarry. Now and then a frenzy of such activity by a gang of birds would indicate a hapless shoal of fish had been detected near the surface. The only other skyward activity is the motion and sound of a small plane or a helicopter, but they soon pass by.

Here could be the additional sight of a pod of porpoises attracted to the commotion and by tracking backwards and forwards indulging themselves of some easy got food. Their backs gracefully arching in and out of the water as they give themselves a burst of speed through the swarm of fish, a great party by all – except the poor fish! Just another daily spectacle of raw nature at work.

On such days the surface of the sea is otherwise gently flat and calm, reflecting the colourful sky occasionally seen in impossible azure shades, and only now and then being ruffled or gently rocked by a passing vessel, and, no matter how slight, the displaced trails of water rolling out from their pointed
source and seemingly emanating for ever until reaching the shore. Larger ships and craft of course causing the inevitable breaking waves to make land with a noisy turbulence cause by both the summersaulting water and the gravels being pushed back and forth by the breakers. A short continuum of noise and motion emanates until the source rolls on and the peaceful equilibrium returns.

Auxiliary Naval vessel on the Gareloch

Unfortunately, and often, depending on prevailing winds, the idyllic quiet does not always return as the banging and clanging and din of the heavy industry and traffic at Greenock and Gourock speedily fly over the flat estuary, invading the otherwise tranquil peninsula with an unwelcome and insistent din. At such times the mind has to focus on the visual aspects of the sojourn, concentrating if possible to the exclusion of the man made noises from across the water.

The iconic Waverly, last ocean going paddle ship in the world.

Ships of any shape or size are now seldom seen across what once was one of the busiest marine thorough fares in the world. Glasgow and the lower Clyde docks and shipyards were world leaders in their heydays, supplying and returning ships and cargoes to and from destinations the world over. The famous and world renowned ‘Doon the Watter’ recreational trips on the various Clyde paddle boats are now part of the nostalgic past, apart from the infrequent sailing of the last ocean going paddle boat in the world; The Waverly. The principal marine traffic now seen are Royal Navy vessels supporting Britain’s Trident nuclear deterrent submarine force based at Faslane on the Gairloch and Loch Long, with daily patrols by police launches, Royal Marine dinghies, tugs, mine
sweepers and of course the submarines themselves. Little else is seen other than the Kilcreggan-Gourock foot ferry plying its way between opposite shores and the vehicle ones from Gourock to the Dunoon coast, apart from the seasonal summer months when smaller sailing craft venture from the various marinas in the area, and the odd canoe or kayak. More recent seasonal visitors to the area are the giant ocean going liners which berth at Greenock and Gourock to take thousands of passengers down the Clyde Estuary and from there to the spectacular west coast of Scotland and further afield. Large tankers still make their way to and from Finnart oil terminal on Loch long and infrequent container ships still arrive at Greenock. All of that sounds like a busy marine channel but compared to the past, more often than not, the estuary seen from the peninsula is empty of surface traffic.

The horizons seen from this location have some interest to offer the beach walker. Beginning on the east side from Green Isle the view across the mouth of the Gairloch sees the attractive ‘planned’ town of Helensburgh, so named after the wife of the founder Sir James Colhoun in the 18th century. The town has much to offer visitors and holidaymaker especially with its attractive blossom lined streets in springtime, and ample shopping throughout the year. The town is full of architectural gems the most famous being Hill House designed by Charles Rennie McIntosh for the book publishing family of Blackie. Perhaps the principal claims to fame for the town are that it is the birthplace of John Logie Baird, inventor of television, and also was the home and base of Henry Bell, inventor and pioneer of the first ocean going paddle steamer in the world; The Comet. Both are commemorated on the long esplanade much used by walkers.

On Ben Bowie, the hill overlooking the town recent archaeological discoveries have pushed the local story back into pre-history. Moving up the Clyde Estuary the promontory of Ardmore is seen jutting into the river, this is a favourite walk especially for geologists, and beyond that, often in a haze is the remarkable Dumbarton Rock with its historic castle and town, and on a very clear day, the Erskine Bridge over the River Clyde before it becomes an estuary is visible.

The Clyde was undoubtedly the highway in ancient times, taking travellers to and from the heart of southern Scotland in Upper Clydesdale where other river routes signposted the way north, south and east.
Ben Bowie overlooking Helensburgh as seen from Gala Law with caravan park in the foreground.

On the opposite side of the river are the conjoined towns of Greenock and Gourock, each with fascinating stories to tell of industrialised shipping and trading, including tobacco, sugar – and slaves! Along their backdrop of the Inverclyde Hills were the eastern extremities of the Roman frontier fort system of the Antonine Wall. At Port Glasgow is the beautifully preserved Newark Castle with its beehive doocot, a must visit site. In the centre of the town is a full scale replica of The Comet.

Now looking westwards the town of Dunoon is visible on the opposite side of the estuary, nearby is the Holy Loch where the first nuclear submarine base was operated in post war years, to be finally moved to its permanent home on the Gairloch at Faslane. The current aspect of militaria on the peninsula is the nuclear armaments storage depot at Coulport occupying the western southern tip
and seen only from the waters of Loch Long where further up is the oil depot of Finnart and another conventional MOD arms dump at Glen Douglas. However Rosneath Peninsula has a long history of military coastal and air defence sites of which much is still visible but languishing in semi hidden places. They have however been made more accessible in the literature of the North Clyde Archaeological Society who have recorded sites dating from the mid-19th century, first and second World Wars and the Cold War ([www.spanglefish.com/northclydearchaeological_society.com](http://www.spanglefish.com/northclydearchaeological_society.com)), much more of local antiquarian interest is available at this web site.
But to get back to our peninsula tour, beginning at Camsail Bay near Rosneath, the vestiges of a fish trap or yair can be seen at low tide as a long linear row of stones, nearby is a poorly preserved wreck of which little is known. At the edge of the beach where the rocks rise from the shore is the exact boundary between Highlands and Lowlands, represented by red sandstone beds on the south and grey schist on the north side, this is known as the Highland Boundary Fault Line.

The old castle at Rosneath

The new mansion, now sadly gone, the four yew trees indicated still survive in the caravan park to show where the house once sat.
Next comes the caravan park site where once stood a medieval castle and more recently, a magnificent Neoclassical mansion known as Rosneath Castle; homes to the Dukes of Argyll. Upon the death of Princess Louise, daughter of Queen Victoria and Dowager Duchess of Argyll in 1939, the estate and house were taken over by American forces, after which it suffered a disastrous fire and was subsequently and ignominiously blown up in 1961. Only a few majestic trees survive to hint at the former glory of the place.

Continuing the walk along the beach, sections of Devonian age sandstones and conglomerate 350M years old, are traversed until Culwatty Bay is reached. The beach here has little to commend it as it is rather slippery being covered in sea weed for the most part at low tides. At the upper end of the bay is the Green Island, accessible at lower tides, this is a great place to observe at close hand seals basking on the rocks on Green Island itself and also slightly further offshore at Perch Rock, although great stealth is necessary as they are extremely shy and wary creatures out of water. Not so in the sea however, as they will often follow pedestrians along the shore, heads popping up periodically to keep an inquisitive eye of you. On the south side of the island are a group of large erratic boulders, transported here by glaciers moving down from the north.
estuary coastline. Fine views across the estuary to Greenock and Gourock are now to be had from here on. Two lovely small bays with both sandstone shelves and gravel beaches make ideal picnic places. (But take any litter home!)

Rounding another corner the two Meikleross beaches come into view with Gala Law Hill behind and its towering radio mast. These beaches and indeed the entire walk described here have been under intense litter removal for over five years by the writer, however, although a prolonged period of deposition had taken place unchecked, much still remains to be done to clear 'historic' rubbish pushed into the adjacent woodland by various storm surges, nevertheless, dozens of tons of material have been, and still are being removed, the actual beaches however are now regularly cleaned and maintained as a natural looking environment. During WWII the woodland around the two bays were extensively occupied by American military encampments, the footings of many buildings are still evident among the trees. At Meikleross west beside an access track onto the beach are the dumped concrete remains of Rosneath Farm WWII Anti-Aircraft Battery.

Also in this bay is a finely preserved fish trap, seen however, only at low tide.

Some attractive shells can be found on this beach such as different whelks, cockles, horse mussels, razor shells, limpets and occasionally scallop and other types, sea anemones, common starfish and small crab can also be seen. Strand lines of various weed types contain countless sand hoppers, which when disturbed from weed or below driftwood or stone make their characteristic Olympian jumps to disappear almost immediately under a new hiding place. Such habitats and hoppers form an important food source to various waders such as oyster catchers and a great variety of ducks, gulls and waders. Much work is ongoing to clear this beach of ancient buried litter, but progress has been made with at least 10m of beach reclaimed and looking better each year, a message in plastic bottle tops nailed to a beam now appeals to walkers to help in the fight against litter, especially plastic in all of its shapes and forms.
A variety of colourful flowers and plants has now been recorded here and frequent bird nests on the gravels are noted annually. Seasonal jelly fish are regularly stranded on the beaches but should not be touched as tentacles can still pack a nasty sting.

The author with one of several skips filled with rubbish from Meikleross beaches.

Litter – what litter? The same view, showing how it disappears.
Get the message?

Litter – what litter? The same views with rubbish being subsumed into the environment.
Another day’s work, getting beach rubbish ready for uplift.
Just a few of the nice things to be seen now on Meikleross beaches.
Much of the long beach between Meikleross and Portkil is characterised with large boulders dumped to prevent erosion. They have colourful and attractive geological patterns on individual rocks, often with an additional covering of equally attractive yellow and grey lichens, forming a myriad of shapes. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder but everywhere there is something attractive to see, whether looking at the sky, the horizon or your feet.

The beach from Portkil to Kilcreggan pier continues to throw up the odd surprise, sadly it is here that two dead seals and two porpoises have been recorded, their demise is unknown, but pollution is suspected, interestingly, few sea dead birds have been found, although in one stormy winter a number of razorbills were found. But those events cover over five years of regular walking, so the statistics may therefore be considered slight.

When one reaches two jetties projecting into the water at Portkil; one made with massive boulders and the other with concrete, these indicate early and late 19th century works. The stone one dates to
the early 19th C and the concrete one is part of the extensive WWI military installation on Fort Road where massive coastal guns were erected to withstand potential attacks by French ships but soon adapted to deal with the German threat in the Great War. Luckily they were never used in anger. The remains are thought to be the best preserved of their kind in Scotland, some having been extensively researched by a local historian and some by the local Archaeology Society, the work by both can be viewed in various files in Cove public library. Within the camp part of the installations the local archaeologists are searching for elusive ‘Stone Coffins’ discovered at the beginning of the 19th century. The search continues and so far two Bronze Age burials have been discovered, but not the previously reported ones; one is a child inhumation in a tiny stone coffin, the body having long decayed, and the other is a nearby cremation with human bone buried in a pot, a rare type of Bronze Age bead was also found.

A tiny grave for a tiny person (child), cremation burial in a pot and a rare faience bead, all Bronze Age.

One aspect of the coastline near Kilcreggan is worthy of a visit, it is the sea cliffs set back from the beach but easily accessed by a road leading from Portkil Road at a point where an ornamental gateway and pond have been constructed. The ancient sea cliffs are composed of the Devonian red sandstones and conglomerates and show numerous strata indicating different phases of massive floods from the north when the sand and cobble stones were washing down from a desert. Furthermore some small cave like structures exist and the largest one has been shown to have been occupied during the Bronze Age around 4000 years ago. Further archaeological work is intended by the local Society.

Portkil sea cliff cave, with a rare Bronze Age cloak fastener and pottery.
Fascinating geology and archaeology combined at a single site. Portkil caves.

At the coastal end of this access road to the caves is another stone jetty which may also have been built for the military activity around WWI. However, sometime around 1930 a rubbish dump was created beside it and a search of the beach here can reveal much broken domestic pottery and detritus of the period.

At Kilcreggan another ancient stone pier projects in the sea, it is known to have been associated with landing coal for the expanding communities during the early 19th century. The beach is now changed in geological character as it lies on the northern side of the Highland Boundary fault Line and consists of schists and gneiss rocks, sometimes referred to as greywacke. Here at Kilcreggan is the timber pier for the passenger service to Gourock and is known as the oldest working pier on the upper Clyde. Fine views of Rosneath Peninsula can be had from the short journey over the estuary here.

The long stretch of beach road between Kilcreggan and Coulport is lined with a fantastic series of individually styled villas, these are fully described as to date, architect and history in the publication by Walker and Sinclair (below).
While the beach from Kilcreggan via Cove to Coulport is attractive in many ways, especially with fine views down the estuary to Arran and Goat Fell in the distance, and with many weed free stony beaches and rock formations, and especially beaches which abound in flattened pebbles ideal for decorative art or garden work, there is one peculiar beach rock worthy of mention and viewing; a large erratic boulder was painted in 1922 to celebrate Tutankhamun but named Tut Tut, it is regularly repainted and makes a strikingly surprising sight on the beach.

However, it is to the landward side that one mostly looks for interest of a different kind.

Famed for its architectural interest in the many villas designed and built in the 19th century by eminent architects for equally eminent business men, often as holiday homes to escape the grime of Glasgow and reached originally by boat to private jetties. The list of important styles of homes, their architects and owners’ names is long, and as they have been published regularly, as have those of Helensburgh, they need not be repeated here.

However, along the roadside from Rosneath to Coulport are interesting mileage markers of cast iron, once placed every mile of the route to Dumbarton town, many are now missing, however of particular interest is the consistent spelling on all the survivors of Dunbarton, giving the lie to the oft quoted rule of the town being spelled with a ‘m’ while the county was spelled using ‘n’.

So the sojourn along the southern tip of Rosneath terminates at the imposing security gates and installations of Coulport, the MOD establishment which services Faslane on the Gairloch. However, from here fine views across Loch Long to The Holy Loch one time home of the American submarine fleet of Polaris missiles and the Ardentinny coastline, as well as better views down the Clyde Estuary.
This short article merely highlights some of the interesting and picturesque aspects of the area, perhaps the final one to mention are the magnificent sunsets regularly seen from all areas around the coast, a coastline which has so much to offer the casual or prolonged visitor, if the tourist extends their interest only slightly further inland the attractions and histories are multiplied significantly, making the area a destination for lengthy or repeat visits. Cafes, pubs and Hotels cater for visitors.

From sky, to sea, to horizon, you will find Rosneath Peninsula a fascinating and rewarding place to explore.

Sunset of the Gareloch

Sunset as seen from Helensburgh
Moonlight over Helensburgh, seen from Rosneath.

Cove beach
Meikleross Bay

Find a stone that glistens when you walk on the shore
One rolled throughout the ages by the ocean’s mighty roar
Feel it with your fingers, with a grain of sand
Salted with the memories of far off distant lands
Hide it in your pocket, where other eyes cannot see
It’s your piece of the ocean and all eternity
Meikleross Bay stones and shells

Beaches to be proud of, Portkil
Meikleross Bay – litter free at last

The changing seasons on Gareloch at Rosneath Castle Caravan Park

Further selected reading: Available in local libraries.


**Plus various reports by local historians and archaeology society in Helensburgh and Cove Public Libraries.**