



Points of Interest

Points of Interest on the Heart of Scotland 100 Route

by Ken Falconer

Our walk starts at Dunkeld, located 15 miles north of Perth on the north-east bank of the River Tay and with a population about 1000. A monastery was founded on the site in the early 7th century after an expedition to Scotland by St Columba, and in the 9th century Kenneth MacAlpine (popularly regarded as the first king of Scots) brought over relics of St Columba from Iona. The monastery was raided by Vikings, but the See of Dunkeld was revived by Alexander in the 12th century.

The Cathedral was begun in 1260 but not completed until 1501 and so displays a mixture of Norman and gothic architecture. It was stripped of much of its richness in the reformation and parts are now roofless. Nevertheless the building remains in use as a parish church.

Much of the town was destroyed at the Battle of Dunkeld in 1689 at which the Jacobites were defeated. Most of the existing buildings date from rebuilding in the 18th Century.

The headquarters of our walk, at the Drill Hall, is in the market place, known as The Cross, which is dominated by the Atholl Memorial Fountain, a monument for George Murray, 6th Duke of Atholl.

Nearby, though not directly on our route, is the Loch of the Lowes, a nature reserve run by the Scottish Wildlife Trust, which has for many years seen nesting Ospreys as well as many other birds.

The walk heads northwards into the Forest of Clunie ('forest' = hunting ground) and it will be 13 miles before we meet another road. An easy track climbs gently, first through woodland and then across heather moorland. After 6 miles we reach the attractive Loch Ordie ('loch' = lake), popular with day walkers and fishermen. From here the track crosses more remote moorland, though the deer fences are a reminder of human activity. The attractive Lochan Oisinneach Mor ('Big Angular Lochan', 'lochan' = small lake) comes into view, and a mile later Lochan Oisinneach Beag ('Small Angular Lochan').

We ascend steeply for a short distance to a col, where a panorama of the Grampian hills opens up. Following paths across rough moorlands we reach a track that eventually drops through woodland to Strathardle ('strath' = valley) and the village of Kirkmichael ('kirk' = church) on the River Ardlie. There have been settlements here since 200BC, but it was in the 13th century that John de Gemmelstoun founded a church dedicated to St Michael, from which the village takes its name. The Kirkmichael Michaelmas Fair was one of Scotland's largest cattle markets which lasted for up to two weeks each September where dealers from the lowlands would purchase cattle from the highland drovers. Traditionally, deals were concluded by shaking hands across the Siller ('Silver') Burn ('burn' = stream) to the west of the village.

For the next two miles we follow the Catheran Trail waymarked by a red heart. This long distance path, named after the maulauding cattle thieves known as the Catarans, is a 64 mile circular route from Blairgowrie, going northwards through Bridge of Cally and Alyth, into Glenshee ('glen' = valley) and over to Glenisla before returning via Kirkmichael.

After passing through the hamlet of Enochdhu ('Black Meadow'), we follow an estate track beside Allt Fearnach ('allt' = river) northwards for five miles to reach the remote cottage at Daldhu. A track

takes us beside Allt Glen Loch ('River in the Glen of the Loch') to a junction. Glen Loch continues northwards from here, past the ambiguously named Loch Loch - if you take the wrong turn and continue to follow paths northwards through the glens it may be 40 miles before you come to any habitation or road!

However, our route swings south-westwards. You are in the heart of the mountains now with Beinn a' Ghlo ('Hill of the Veil') on your right, at 3704ft (1129m), the highest Munro in the area ('Munro' = 3000+ft hill). Sloping up to your left is Ben Vuirich ('Hill of Roaring'), which at 2962ft (903m) is a Corbett. ('Corbett' = 2500-2999ft hill).

The track gradually rises to a flattish col at around 1800ft, with fine views of Carn Leith ('Grey Hill'), 3200ft (975m), ahead. After a fairly level mile the track swings southwards and descends to the remote farmstead of Shinagog. A good track then leads to the attractive Loch Moraig and we descend along a minor road to join the River Tilt which is followed into Blair Atholl.

Blair Atholl on the River Garry occupies a strategic position at the south of the main route through the Grampians, the route followed the railway and the A9 to Aviemore and Inverness. The town has grown up from the early 1800s and now has a population of 600. The Atholl Country Life Museum and the impressive village hall are amongst its attractions.

We make our way behind the massive, mainly 16th century, Blair Castle, the seat of the Dukes of Atholl which was left in trust in 1996 on the death of the 10th Duke and which is open to the public. The impressive interior contains many paintings and artefacts and the ballroom is decorated with 175 pairs of antlers. The extensive gardens and grounds contain many follies and interesting trees.

After a couple of miles through Baluain Wood we suddenly come upon the Falls of Bruar, and we follow this series of waterfalls down beside a steep gorge. Originally the area was open hillside, but after visiting the falls in 1787, Robert Burns wrote a poem 'The Humble Petition of Bruar Water to the Noble Duke of Atholl' asking that trees be planted around the falls. The Duke agreed, though it was after Burns' death that he planted over 100,000 trees including many larch and scots pine.

The walk drops back down to the River Garry and the hamlet of Calvine. For the next 5 miles it is easy walking along the cycle track formed by the old A9, with the new A9 opened in 1983 on your right, and the River Garry on your left and the railway just beyond. Ahead on either side ahead are the vast wildernesses of Atholl and Badenoch and you hardly notice the ascent as the route rises to nearly 1000ft near remote Dalnacardoch Lodge.

Dalnacardoch was the base of General Wade in 1729 as he carried out his programme of road building in the area. In 1724 George 1 asked General Wade to inspect Scotland to make recommendations for suppressing Jacobite activities. Wade proposed construction of roads, bridges and barracks to improve communications and was immediately appointed 'Commander in Chief of His Majesty's forces, castles, forts and barracks in North Britain' to carry out his own recommendations. Many of Wade's well-made roads still exist, either as routes of modern roads or as well preserved tracks across moorland. The A9 more or less follows a Wade road, and we now turn southwards along another Wade route.

This minor road takes us up through moorland to a plateau next to a forest - the grouse butts remind us that this is grouse shooting country. Ahead, we see the pointed Schiehallion, a mountain that will dominate our views for the rest of the walk - but more of that later. From Maud Loch we descend steeply down the side of the glen to the dam of Loch Errochty.

The three mile long loch is entirely artificial, created in 1957 by damming Errochty Water as part of the Tummel hydro-electric power scheme. Water flows from the dam along a six mile tunnel to a power station at the western end of Loch Tummel. We walk along the south side of the loch passing various ruins, mainly remains of sheep farm buildings that were abandoned when the glen was flooded.

Past the end of the loch, the path becomes indistinct and rough, and turns steeply uphill beside a sparse forest. Towards the top there are fine views westwards across Rannoch Moor with the head of Glencoe visible in the far distance. Climbing to a col at around 2000ft, Schiehallion rises in front of us and in the valley below we see Loch Rannoch on the right with the River Tummel flowing to the left.

The descent to Kinloch Rannoch is through a large corrie crossed by a prominent broken wall and we join a zig-zag track that leads through an attractive birch forest down to the village. Kinloch Rannoch is curiously named since 'kinloch' means head of the loch, not the outflow.

Loch Rannoch stretches 10 miles west from the village, and the lochside road continues for a further 8 miles to end at the isolated Rannoch Station on the West Highland Line's remarkable route across Rannoch Moor. The area was inhabited before 500AD when St Blane came as a missionary from Iona. Nowadays it depends on tourism and outdoor activities - a large and unsightly hotel occupies the north bank of the loch half a mile west of the village.

We cross the River Tummel and are soon ascending a good track up the hillside to reach the Tempar Bothy, a small stone building quite well-camouflaged from our approach and haunted by the ghost of Hendry. The next two miles are rough with intermittent paths that may be awkward in mist. We drop to a flat area at the head of Gleann Mor ('big glen') at the confluence of two burns - hopefully there are just enough stones showing to step across on. We soon join a boggy track leading up to the Glenmore Bothy.

Our route has taken us close to the stony southern flank of Schiehallion ('The Fairy Hill of the Caledonians'), a popular Munro at 3554ft (1083m), which was bought by the John Muir Trust in 1999. Because of its symmetrical shape Schiehallion was selected in 1774 for the ground-breaking experiment to 'weigh the Earth'. A team led by the Astronomer Royal, the Rev Dr Nevil Maskelyne, made extremely accurate observations on the deflection of a pendulum from the vertical by the gravitational attraction of the mountain. They concluded that the average density of the earth was about 4500 kilograms per cubic metre, a value within 20% of the modern accepted value. One consequence was that overall the earth was much denser than the rock of the mountain and its interior must therefore consist largely of metals. The experiment required accurate estimates of the volume of the mountain and this was carried out by the mathematician Charles Hutton who had the idea of representing height on a map by joining points of equal height, the first use of contour lines in terrestrial mapping.

From the Glenmore Bothy we follow a good track south-eastwards over moorland rising to the highest point of our walk at around 2150ft. To our right are the peaks of the Carn Maig ('Hill of Sorrow') group of Munros and ahead in the distance the plateau of Ben Chonzie ('Mossy Hill' pronounced 'y-hone'). As we descend steadily, Loch Tay comes into sight on the right as well as the eastern end of the Ben Lawers range, with Glen Lyon, the longest and perhaps the loneliest glen in Scotland, stretching westwards.

Passing between estate buildings we join the road at Fortingall, a small village with a number of claims to fame. According to legend Pontius Pilate, the judge at Jesus' trial, was born in the village. The yew tree that stands in the churchyard is estimated to be 5000 years old and claimed to be the oldest living thing in Europe (and possibly in the world). Nearby are the attractive white-harled church and the Fortingall Hotel, renowned for its cream teas.

We cross a narrow pedestrian suspension bridge and enter Drummond Hill Forest, planted in the early 17th century and thought to be Scotland's first managed forest. The forest is noted for its population of capercaillie. After a couple of miles we drop back down to the River Lyon which we cross by a road bridge by the ruins of Comrie Castle. For the next five miles we follow easy paths and tracks alongside the riverbank, first by the Lyon but soon joining the River Tay. There are views of Castle Menzies, home of the Clan Menzies, to the left, and then we enter Aberfeldy over the splendid five arch pinnacled bridge built by General Wade in 1733.

With a population of nearly 2000, the market town of Aberfeldy is the largest town on the route, and is a popular tourist destination, witnessed by the large number of guest houses, B&Bs, shops and eating places. Nearby are the Birks of Aberfeldy, a scenic gorge, made famous in a poem of that name by Robert Burns.

We leave Aberfeldy along the road eastwards near the Tay passing the distillery on the right, whilst on the far side of the river is Killiechassie House, a 19th century estate house, ranked amongst the 100 finest homes in Britain and bought by JK Rowling, the 'Harry Potter' author, in 2001. We soon turn south-eastwards and enter the Griffin Forest. For the next 14 miles we follow the Aberfeldy to Dunkeld cycle route, developed and waymarked by the Perth and Kinross Countryside Trust, with yellow arrows on green discs to mark the route. Pleasant tracks through the forest lead gently upwards to the scenic Loch Kennard.

We then descend gradually through the Craigvinean Forest eventually joining a minor road at Ballinlick on the River Braan. As we walk along the road we see ahead on the right Birnam Hill, made famous in Shakespeare's play by the witches' prophesy that Macbeth was safe 'till Birnam Wood do come to Dunsinaine'. Macduff's army camouflaged themselves with branches of trees from the wood to march on Dunsinaine Castle and hence defeated Macbeth. With Dunsinaine some 15 miles to the south-east across the River Tay this would seem a rather awkward operation!

We enter The Hermitage, a site dedicated to the semi-mythical Gaelic poet Ossian, which was created by the Dukes of Atholl in the 18th century and is now owned by the National Trust for Scotland. We follow a path beside the River Braan as it tumbles over rapids and down waterfalls to pass Ossian's Cave and Ossian's Hall, a circular folly overlooking the falls.

After crossing the Braan three times we pass under the A9 to reach Dunkeld Bridge, a five arch stone bridge over the River Tay built by Thomas Telford in 1802. We cross the bridge and almost immediately turn left into The Cross and the Drill Hall to complete our 100 mile walk through Perth and Kinross.

Ken Falconer, April 2009

