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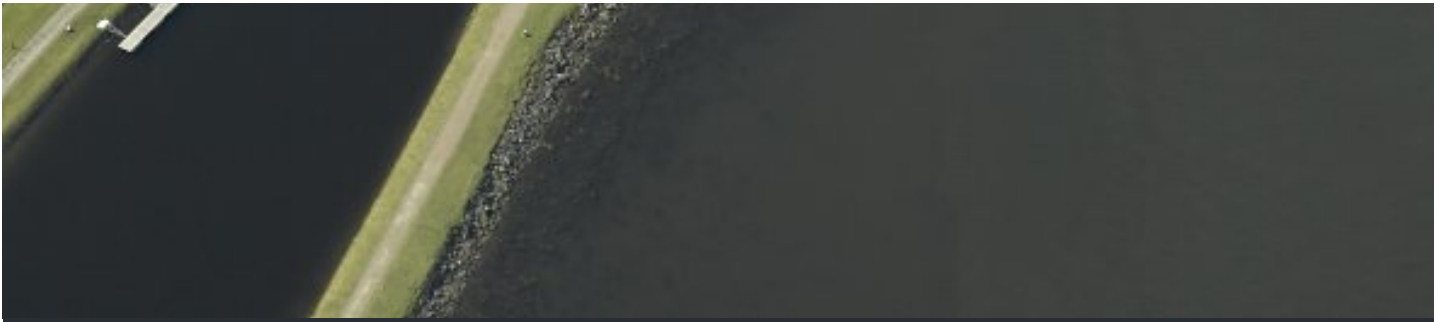
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The Caledonian Canal and Clachnaharry Sea Lock, The Great Glen, Highlands



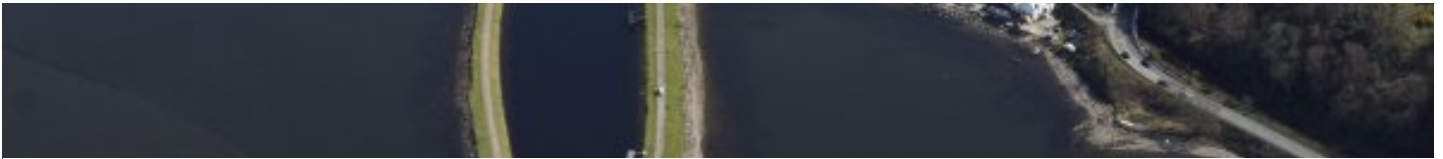


The Tail of the Leviathan

It was common in my childhood to travel the 60 miles of the Caledonian Canal from Inverness to Fort William in an old but graceful yacht, Galante, rescued from ignominy by my father's skill and my lack thereof. At this tender age I had little appreciation for the yacht, built in Fife in 1937, or the canal itself – an engineering triumph wrought from the heart of the Highlands between 1803 and 1822. They simply provided a method of escape from palpable mediocrity to the wild coasts and islands of the west. At Corpach the canal disgorged us for a summer adventure, with beach landings at Coll, Canna or Mingulay and a clashing accompaniment of midges or high winds. By way of contrast, each school day I passed the eastern end of the canal at Clachnaharry. The occasional yachts and fishing boats, and 'noddy boats' as the littlest hire craft were known, punctuated our scholastic commute as the road bridge swung open to let them through.

A school friend stayed out at the Clachnaharry sea lock, a place where salt water meets fresh, where turbulence meets calm, and where a distinctly maritime breeze whips over the canal jutting out like the tale of a leviathan. This liminal place was created with great difficulty – the soft muddy bank of the Moray Firth forced the labourers to build two parallel embankments more than 400m out into the sea. Material was taken from 'the hole', a still massive quarry in Clachnaharry, and left to settle on the mud for six months. Good quality sandstone was taken by sea from Redcastle across the Beaully Firth 7 kilometres away. Ships entering the sea lock could rest and exchange goods at Muirtown, where cranes, storehouses and a hotel awaited. This area would later develop as the Glen Albyn Distillery, saw, tweed and bobbin mills, and a buoy factory – all now replaced by a somehow less evocative Co-op and B&M Home Store (the Glen Albyn brand is now owned by Diageo). From here five locks lifted the ships up to the level of Loch Ness. One lock claimed the life of a former schoolmate in 1999 as he returned from a night out in the town, and that of his grandfather before him.





The Highland Canal

The story of the canal began some 200 years earlier when the Highlands were undergoing dramatic change – the violent ebb of Jacobean hopes had led in part to subjugation, and certainly to a turn both in land management and in the relations between chief and clansman. Coincidentally population began to rise, famously resulting in the emigration of many thousands of people to the New World, driven by an appetite for a better life, and in many cases by appalling conditions and treatment at home. Government took a close interest, directly managing some estates, striving to control local culture, and pushing forward the fishing industry with investment – the new towns of Ullapool and Tobermory being particularly well known. War too played its part – improving the infrastructure of the Highlands helped to insure against future rebellions, and men of fighting age were increasingly employed in Government regiments. The Royal Navy also had an interest in a better maritime infrastructure. Thus construction on the canal began on the premise that ‘it was feasible, it would be useful and it would stem the tide of emigration’ (Cameron 2005, 26). Much of the work was driven forward by Thomas Telford, the ‘Colossus of Roads’, a man whose life’s work is cast among our industrial and transport foundations.

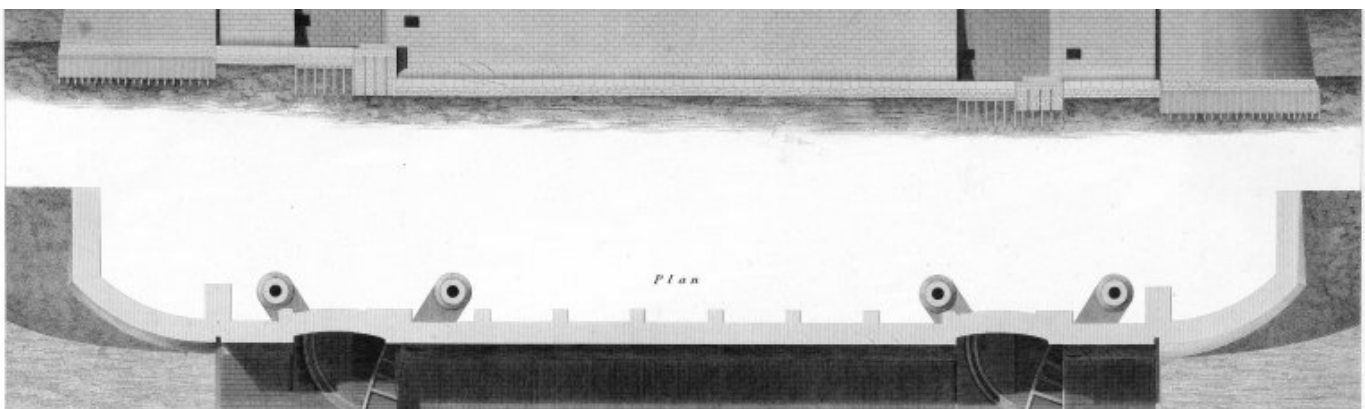
The canal is characterised by its white and black livery, the sandstone and wooden locks, workmanlike buildings and, of course, by the stunning Highland scenery. The jigsaw pieces that make up its entire length account for more than 200 sites within Canmore, and more than 1200 items in the archive. But they capture only part of its unique character. It is in fact the pace of the canal that is so remarkable. Moving a large yacht through the locks takes hours – waiting for the clock or the keeper, pulling the boats by hand, tying the bow and stern ropes, letting go, panicking about the crushing weight of 16 unbraked tonnes. And even with a clement wind, a journey through the canal will take a couple of days, with entry and exit to some extent affected by the tide. It is a welcome respite from a bustling modern world and a gentle introduction to the cutting edge of the early 19th century, and the wild scenery of the Highland glens. After a collision off the coast of Muck Galante now stands onshore at Muirtown, like a fish out of water. The canal, with recent reinvestment and renewed interest, looks to have a long and vibrant future, still reflects ideas of Improvement and the hard graft of 3000 Highlanders.

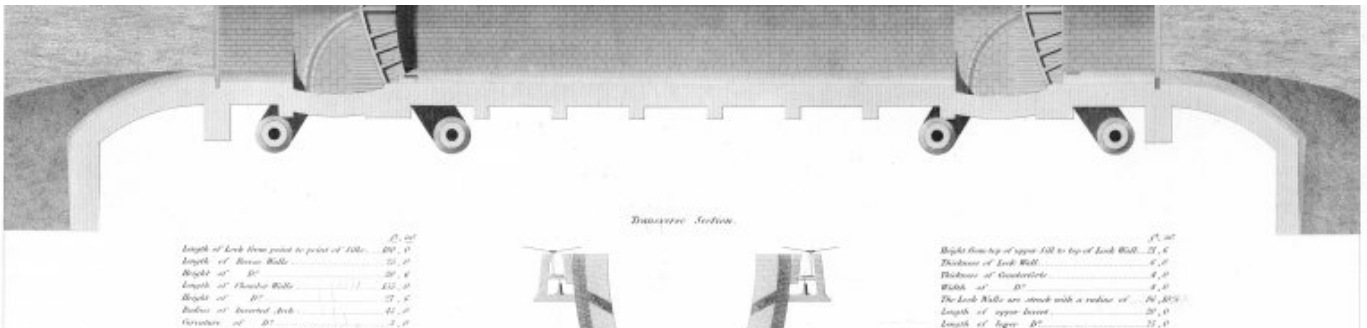
Sources:

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George Geddes - Archaeologist, Survey and Recording





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