

Aber Path to Loch Lomond National Nature Reserve

Walk a line through time



Millennium Hall to Aber Dam Bridge

Lines in the Landscape

Take the Right of Way path north from beside the Millennium Hall in Gartocharn. Pause to appreciate the grand view of Loch Lomond, then step into a farmscape whose lay-out would have been familiar to people several generations ago. The pattern of fields and hedges around you is identical to the one already well-established by 1865, when the map on the opposite page was printed.

Fenced 'enclosure' of what had once been open fields - usually to benefit wealthier local landowners - had re-shaped much of lowland Scotland in the decades before that. There aren't many places left where you can see such a well-preserved enclosure landscape.

Gartocharn village, which developed due to sandstone quarrying, was in its infancy in the mid 19th century, but growing. At that time, Gaelic was still the language used by many of the people in this parish, which then had a population of 1,085 - about 300 more than today. Most of the small farms here would have had some pigs and poultry, and the typical cattle were Ayrshires crossed with Highland breeds or pure Ayrshires.

Colin Mitchell and one of his heavy horses leading in the hay at Cambusmoon in the 1920s





- ▲ Field boundaries near the first part of the walk, as shown on a mid-Victorian Ordnance Survey map (left) and on an aerial photograph (right) more than 140 years later. Compare them and spot some amazing similarities.
(Aerial photo © Getmapping plc)

Big Clydesdale horses were commonly used for ploughing and carting. These included the ones worked by Henry Bell Cross, a local poet, when he was a young ploughman at Claddochside in the 1850s:

*When wark was needed they were ready
Baith back an' forrat, sure an' steady;
An' well he laucht tae see them prancin',
Adorned wi siller buckles glancin'*

And as he walked behind the plough, Henry would have seen hawthorns, brambles, wild roses and honeysuckle in the hedges and wildflowers beneath, hear chaffinches in the trees and watch wild geese fly overhead in winter, as you can today.

Aber Dam Bridge

Ancient tribes and a luckless rebel

Pause at the bridge over the burn, which shares its name with the township of Aber. It is here that the burn was dammed to provide water to power the local mill. The tenant farmers of Aber were forbidden by law to grind their own corn. They had to take their grain to the mill and pay a fee to the miller.

‘Aber’ is an ancient Brittonic word, meaning a place where a river meets a wider body of water. Here, it comes from the meeting of the River Endrick with Loch Lomond, which you’ll see at the furthest point of the walk.

The word is still in widespread use in Wales. It was in the everyday speech of the ‘Britons’, a tribe who had a stronghold at Dumbarton, about 12km away as the goose flies, until around 1,250 years ago.

Much later, the Aber Burn was a fateful line in a national power struggle. When James the Seventh of Scotland (and Second of England) came to the throne in 1685, Protestants feared he would spread Catholic religion at their expense. They mounted a rebellion, led by the Duke of Monmouth in England and by the Earl of Argyll in the west of Scotland.

When Argyll found that his route to Glasgow was blocked at Dumbarton, he turned east. At Aber Burn, he was told that a band of Government ‘redcoat’ troops was just ahead. Instead of attacking, he told his



▲ *Dam of Aber Bridge, over the burn which marks an historic turning point and bears an ancient name*

men to light fires to give the impression that they were camping for the night.

Then his force headed for the Kilpatrick Hills, to the south. Many of the clansmen saw that the cause was hopeless, and wisely slipped away home in the darkness. Argyll fled in disguise. He was soon captured, taken to Edinburgh and beheaded as a traitor.

Road to the shore

Saints, thieves and cow-herds

Turn left onto the main public road, then go right soon after, along the smaller road in the direction of the loch. You are now in the heart of the old township of Aber and on land which has strong links to the early Celtic church.

The parish name - 'Kilmaronock' - comes from St Ronan, a bishop of Bute who died in 737, just before the Britons lost control of Dumbarton. A couple of centuries earlier, St Kessog preached in the area. A chapel dedicated to him (now gone) was built not far from this small road. The local place-name 'San Makessan' still gives a connection to Kessog.

As you move on, look for a large yew tree in the field to the left of the road. This was a gathering point for the cattle that were once an important part of life in the township.

Glens near the north of Loch Lomond were home to two clans - the Macfarlanes and the Macgregors - who were keen cattle rustlers. Whenever livestock was stolen, the local landowner had to pay his tenants for their losses. Tiring of this expense, William Cochrane of Kilmaronock signed-over the local farmlands to his tenants in the late 1600s, in return for modest payment. Once the small farmers (all of whom were fairly poor) owned the land, the cattle raids stopped!





▲ *The ancient yew where the Horn of Aber was blown each day to muster the township cattle*

For more than a century after that, the 'Aber Lairds', as the small farmers were known, worked the land around here. Each morning, a herdsman would blow a horn beside the yew to muster the Aber cattle. Then he'd take them to the common grazings on the Ring, close to the eastern end of this walk. In the evening, more blasts of the horn would summon the Aber folk to collect their livestock.

As you stand near the yew, try to imagine the sound of its notes, and of hooves and voices, echoing out across the fields. Both horn and township have now vanished.

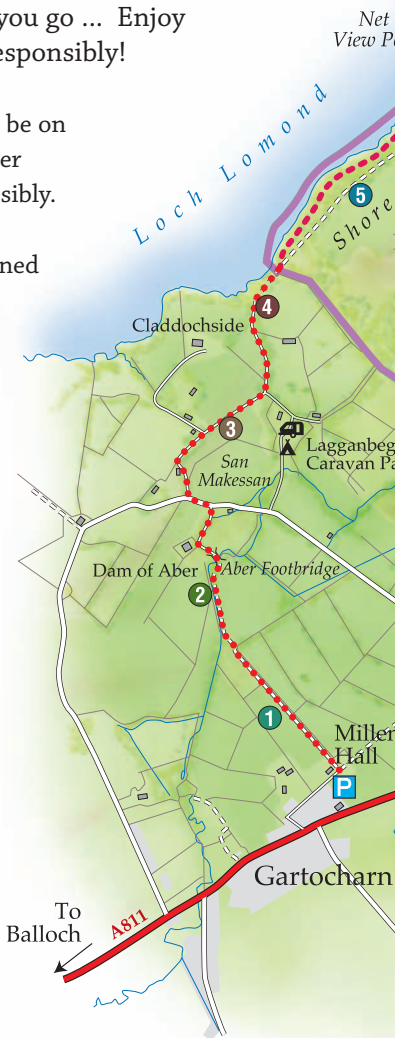
ABER PATH TO LOCH LOMOND NATIONAL NATURE RESERVE

Know the Code before you go ... Enjoy
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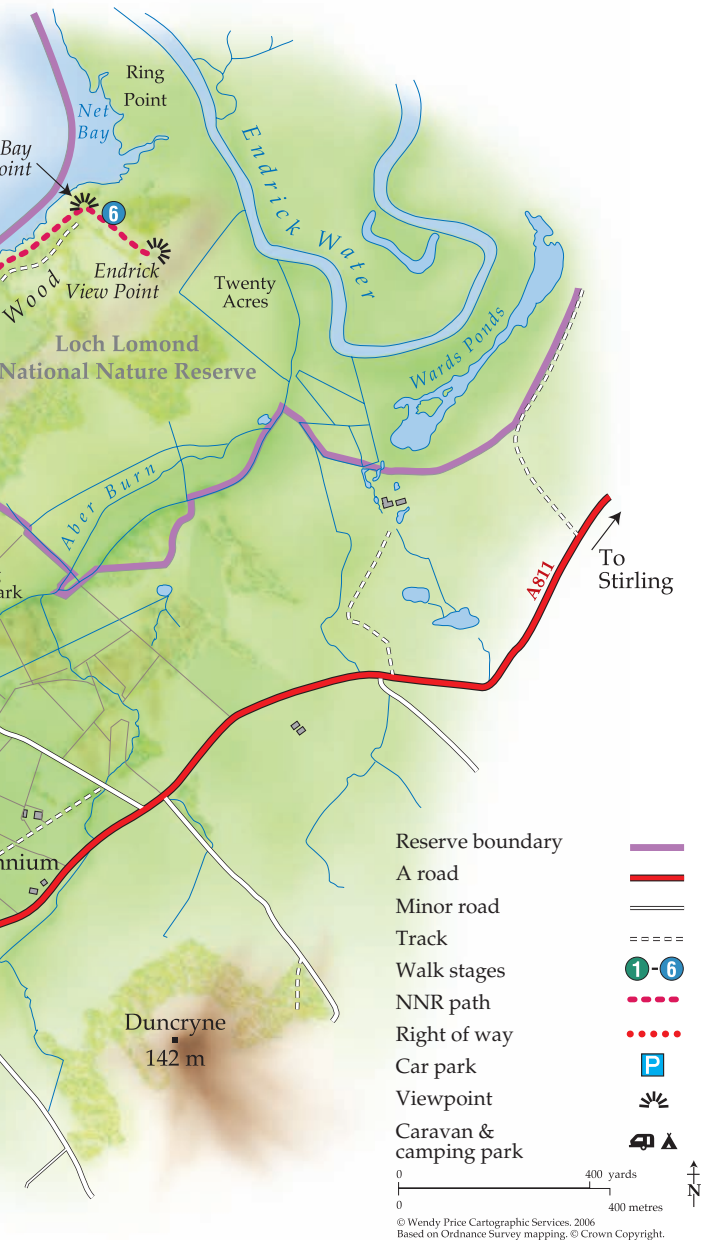
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responsibilities are explained
fully in the Scottish
Outdoor Access Code.

Whether you're in
the outdoors or
managing the
outdoors, the key
things are to :

- **take responsibility
for your own
actions;**
- **respect the interests
of other people;**
- **care for the
environment.**



Find out more about the Scottish Outdoor Access Code by visiting
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Jetty by the woodland shore

Red rock and tanning bark

As you approach the entrance to the National Nature Reserve and the Shore Wood, look down to the loch. When the loch level is low, there's an obvious line of stonework jutting into the water. This is an old jetty that was once crucial to the local economy.

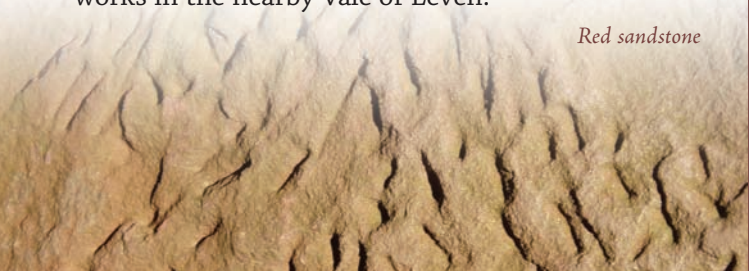
Although the loch, woods and farmland make a bonny rural scene, this area has long had links to urban areas not so far beyond. Today, those links are through recreation in the National Park. But in the 18th and 19th centuries, when Glasgow and other Scottish cities began to grow very quickly, this country parish helped to provide some of the raw materials for city buildings and industry.



Wood sorrel

The village of Gartocharn (not marked on maps of two hundred years ago) grew up in part because of demand in cities for red sandstone from its quarries. Bark from Loch Lomond's oakwoods, perhaps including this one, was used for tanning leather. This was needed to make drive-belts for cotton mills and other factories. Later, acid was extracted from the wood for use in the textile dye works in the nearby Vale of Leven.

Red sandstone





▲ *Bluebells*

◀ *Lesser celandine*

Shallow-draft boats were loaded at the jetty, sailed to Balloch, then taken down the River Leven to Dumbarton. From there, stone, bark and other goods could easily be shipped up the Clyde to Glasgow.

As you move along the woodland path, enjoy plants such as wood sorrel (whose clover-like leaves stay green for much of the year). Primroses, bluebells and lesser celandines bloom here in spring.

Look at the shape of wood's sessile oak trees. Many of them have several stems. That's because their main stems were cut near ground level in the past, to promote this multiple growth.

'Coppicing' like this was a good way to renew resources of bark and timber for harvesting every twenty years or so.

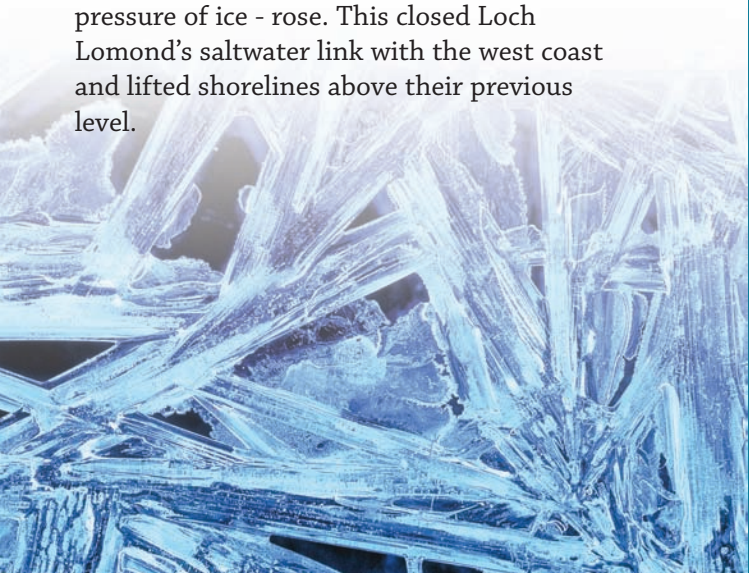
First bench beside the path

Cool moves and fine fish

Pause at the bench, part-way along the wood. By now, you'll be getting used to the amazing funnel-like profile of Loch Lomond. This is a legacy of ice. During the last Ice Age, the whole area of the loch was a main channel for southward-moving ice. In turn, glacier-driven material gouged-out the basin now filled by the loch.

Successive ice melt, freezing and thawing had some striking impacts on this ground towards the end of the Ice Age. In warmer spells of thaw, sea level rose several times, connecting the loch to the sea. One survivor of these times is the powan, a member of the salmon family. It arrived here as a marine fish, but now survives solely in freshwater.

Re-glaciation dumped gravel on the old seaside beaches. But following ice melt (including after the very last big freeze) the land - now released from the enormous pressure of ice - rose. This closed Loch Lomond's saltwater link with the west coast and lifted shorelines above their previous level.





▲ *Loch Lomond from the air*

Some 10,000 years later, those ancient sea margins are still here. Look behind you, as they say in the best pantomimes, to where the ground rises quite steeply to a higher level at the inland edge of the wood. You're looking at the old coast, near which whales and dolphins could have swum.

Crossing the line of the old dyke into the eastern end of the wood, what changes do you notice? Look at the shapes of the trees and at their leaves to get some clues. There are more alder and ash trees here and also more holly, ferns and honeysuckle.

In summer, listen for the songs of many birds and the mewing calls of local buzzards. Redstart, tree pipit, wood warbler and pied flycatcher are among the breeding birds that thrive in Loch Lomond's oakwoods.

Net Bay seat and viewpoint

Wet, wild and beautiful

Take a seat on the bench beyond the eastern end of Shore Wood. Admire the grand view over Net Bay to the mouth of the River Endrick and the promontory on the right called Ring Point, part of the area where the Aber cattle used to graze.

Beyond, you'll see the distinctive shape of Conic Hill. Like the nearby islands in the loch, this lies on the Highland Boundary Fault, the major geological division between Highland and Lowland Scotland. In the distance, above the eastern loch shore, is Ben Lomond.

The Endrick is the largest of the rivers that flow into the loch. The area near its mouth is a special place for wetland birds. Look along the water's edge to see what birds are nearby. In spring and summer, an osprey might fly nearby to fish the shallows. In autumn and winter, hundreds of wildfowl, including Greenland white-fronted geese, greylag geese and flocks of wigeon, mallard and teal, can be among the visiting waterbirds.

Both otter and mink use these shores and waters, ready to make a meal of one of the many kinds of fish, including two kinds of lampreys that use the river. If you've time, carry on inland for a few hundred metres, up the gentle slope by the side of the next wood, to Endrick Viewpoint.



Osprey



- ▲ *Top: Ayrshire cattle grazing at Cambusmoon in the early 1900s, with 'The Dumpling' behind.*
- Left: Net Bay and the mouth of the River Endrick.*
- Right: This is an important wintering area for flocks of the rare Greenland white-fronted goose.*

From here, look over the sweep of low wetland to the south and east. The lowland directly to the south, known as Twenty Acres, is one of central Scotland's most plant-rich wet meadows and was once used for hay-making. It is home to a big variety of wetland plants, including the Scottish dock and tufted loosestrife.

Looking inland in the other direction is the parish landmark of Duncryne - the core of an old volcano, affectionately known locally as 'The Dumpling'.

Car parking is at the Millennium Hall only (see map) and there is no public vehicular access along the road to the National Nature Reserve

The first section of this walk is along the edge of fields, which may contain cattle

Much of the rest is on good path and a small stretch of road

Gradient is fairly gentle throughout

Use stout footwear

Allow 2 hours to do the return trip at an easy pace with time for stops

For more information about the
National Nature Reserve, please contact:

Loch Lomond
& The Trossachs
National Park

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A large print version of this leaflet is
available from SNH on the above number.

If you've enjoyed your visit to this part of the National Nature Reserve, why not try a trip to the trails on nearby Inchcailloch?

For more information, please contact:

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E: Inchcailloch@lochlomond-trossachs.org



This leaflet was created by a partnership between the local Kilmarnock Path Group, Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park and Scottish Natural Heritage.

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