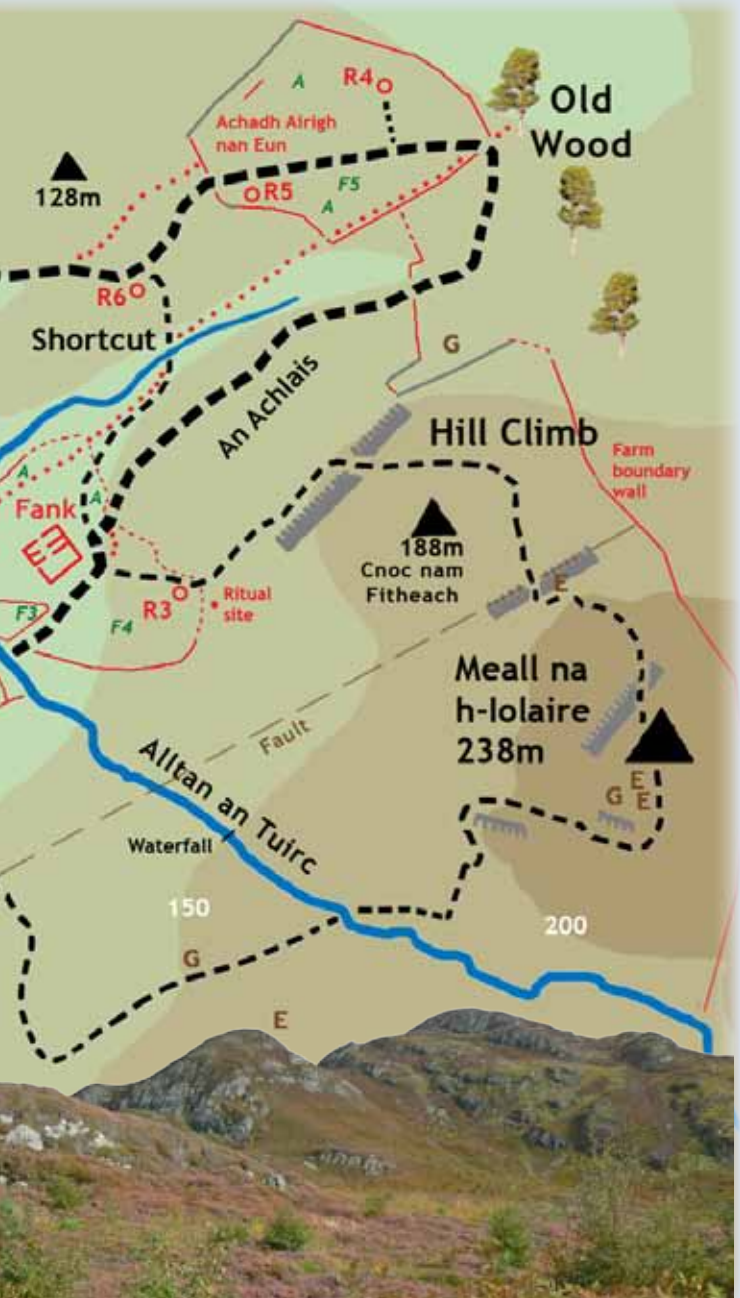
Achtercairn Paths
Gairloch Archaeology and Nature Walks



Above Achtercairn, one of the communities which make up Gairloch, there is a small network of paths, totalling about 5 km.

- Walk the main path circuit: a varied and scenic walk of about 3.5 km / 2 miles.
- Climb the hill Meall na h-lolaire: either up and down the Hill Path, or up by the harder Hill Climb.
- Learn about the Geology of the area and of Wester Ross.
- Find the Archaeological features, especially ten prehistoric Roundhouses.
- Enjoy the Plants and Animals of the area.

This booklet gives information on all of these. It focuses on this area, but much of it will be of more general use around Gairloch.

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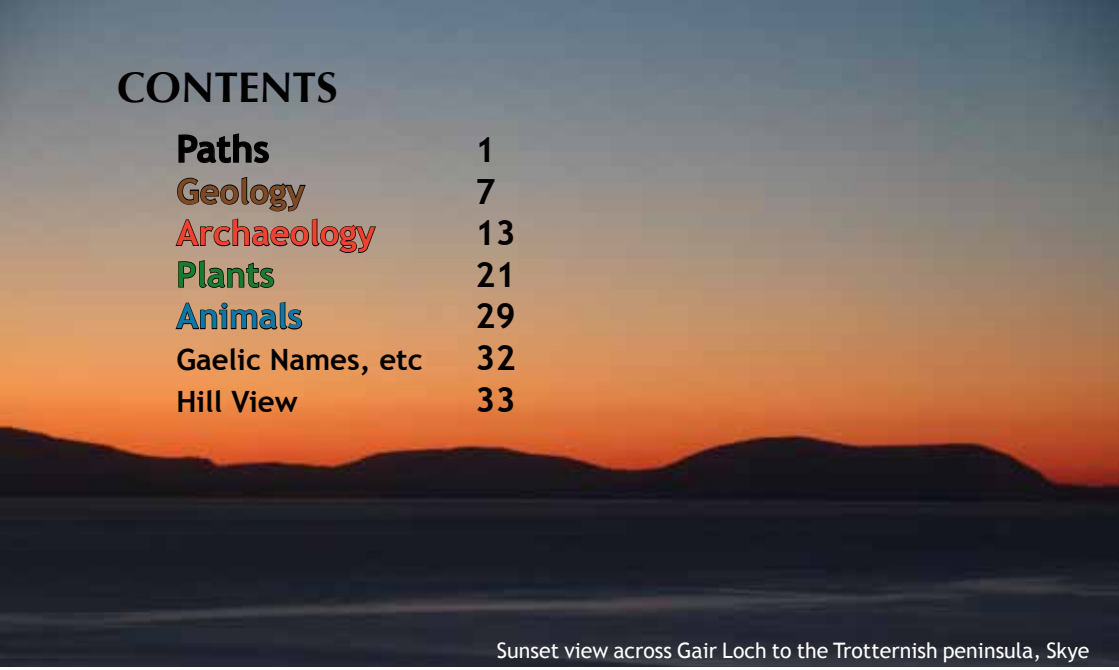


Sunset view across Gair Loch to the Trotternish peninsula, Skye

Wester Ross is, even more clearly than most other areas, defined by its **geology** — the ancient rocks which everywhere break through the land surface, shaped by glaciers. The small, accessible, sheltered and reasonably fertile area of these walks has been much used in the past 4500 years or more by farmers, with many **archaeological** remains from a Neolithic work area and Bronze/ Iron Age Roundhouses to an impressive 19th century livestock enclosure. But now it is part of a major tree-planting scheme: between 2002 and 2007 over two million native trees were planted in the square of land between the A832 and Loch Maree. Grazing animals (sheep, cattle, deer) are excluded by fences, and the **plant** and **animal** life is beginning to reflect this. The hill **Meall na h-Iolaire** which overlooks the area can be climbed to give a fine view of village and loch and, on a good day, of the hills and islands round the horizon.

All pictures in this booklet have been taken in this area, except for a few in the Geology section. “This area” throughout the booklet means the Achtercairn Paths area between the stile, the A832 cattle grid, the old wood and the hill.

The paths vary in quality and may be wet or muddy underfoot: use suitable footwear. After wet weather (not uncommon!) boots are advised.

***The paths are used at your own risk*. They should not present any great difficulty except for the “Hill Climb” which needs fitness, surefootedness and a head for heights (and please use it for ascent only, not descent).**

When it is wet, rocks may be slippery. Off-path, beware of holes in the ground dug for tree-planting. Please tread carefully and avoid causing erosion.

PATHS

Map on Cover

MAIN CIRCUIT *(about 3.5km, 1 hour minimum, 2 hours recommended)*

***If you have limited time**, the walk to Roundhouse 8 and back is recommended. Follow the main route as far as the bottom of this page.*

From the south end of the **GALE Centre** (Tourist Information) follow the side road towards the hill behind (see map on back cover, bottom), until you see to your right a wooden **Stile** over a stone wall. Cross the wall.

From here zigzag on a rough path uphill through bracken (p26) to meet an old track. This is the original road to Poolewe (p20) (you will follow it to the **Old Wood)**. As you walk, try to spot the old walls and fields (p18) shown on the map.

Traverse left across the hillside and then climb through bracken and thick gorse. Roe deer and pine martens (p29) frequent these slopes. Above this you reach flatter ground, mostly covered by heather with new tree planting (p28).

You come to two path junctions. The first, on the right, is the **Hill Path** (p3), with Roundhouses 1 and 2 about 100 metres up it and worth visiting (details of the Roundhouses p14-17). Immediately after this junction there is an oddly-shaped hollow on the right whose purpose is unclear, perhaps a very small quarry or a well. The second path, on the left, will be your return route.

***If you are doing the shorter walk** (see above), turn left here. Descend with care to the burn and cross it. Follow the path on, uphill at first, for about 150 metres until a clear path turns left. This leads to the very large Roundhouse 8. Read about it on page 17. Return to the Stile the same way.*

N.B. How much you will see depends partly on the time of year. From June to September much of the lower ground is covered by bracken, which is still a hindrance for some time after it dies. Every effort will be made to keep the paths and the main features cleared of bracken — but it is a formidable opponent! (p26)

Cross the main burn (stream), called **Alltan an Tuirc** on maps but also known locally as **Allt nan Easan Bana**, and another two smaller ones. Reach a very fine 19th century sheep enclosure, the "Fank" (p20). Opposite the corner of this the **Hill Climb** route heads uphill (p4): Roundhouse 3 is about 50 metres up it.

After the **Fank** follow the main path as it goes up to the right. The path which goes straight on here is a **Shortcut**.

The path soon follows the edge of a flat wet area known as **An Achlais**. It crosses a ruined wall which was the 1800 farm boundary (p19). Some way above the path before you reach the **Old Wood** there are rock slabs polished and scratched by ice (p10). The **Old Wood** (p28), planted in the 19th century, has been largely demolished by storms, most recently in 2005 and 2015. Bear left here to find another path which goes left again at some rocks, trees and fence posts.

This path crosses an old walled field, Achadh Airigh nan Eun ("Field of the Shieling of the Bird", p19). A short way along this path, Roundhouse 4 is about 30 metres to the right along a side path, above the edge of the wood. This is a good area for mosses (p27). Back on the main path, continue through bracken to an area of small hills. Roundhouse 5 is left of the path just before the first rocky outcrop. You leave the field across a wall. Soon Roundhouse 6 is found before the next small hill on the left. The **Shortcut** path joins just before it.

The path is now an old well-made track (p20) descending towards the main road. Another old field with lazybed cultivation (p18) and evidence of peat cutting is seen down to the left (*F6*), with probable traces of a turf wall. The track ends at the **Cattle Grid** on the main road, but turn left about 60 metres before the road, on a third smaller path, probably made during the tree-planting. This area was called Buaile na Tuatha ("Cattle-fold of the tenantry", p20).

This path passes through varied heather, grass and bracken, and can be wet where it follows the edge of the field mentioned above. Roundhouse 7 is buried in heather to the right after a small hill.

Roundhouse 8 is on the next rise in bracken along a 30 metre path to the right, with several shieling buildings around and in it (p19). This is by far the biggest, clearest and most important of the roundhouses, an Iron Age ceremonial centre. If you walk down to the wall 20m below and then follow a path for 70m, you can visit to the left a structure which may be the stone base of a turf cottage (p18).

To find the faint Roundhouse 9 follow a small path, originally made by animals, from Roundhouse 8 over a small rise 40m to the south; a later wall crosses its side.

Return to the main path and continue along it, crossing the old wall which you saw at Roundhouse 9. Finally descend beside another old field wall made of very large stones (*F11*) to cross the burns where they meet, and climb to rejoin the first path (beware slippery rocks). Near the burn crossing look out for flowers such as Spearwort and the insect-eating Butterwort and Sundew (p21).

Turn right to return to the **Stile**. Before you descend the final zigzag path, you can try your hand at finding a hidden roundhouse, if vegetation allows: continue a short way past the turning, and Roundhouse 10 is well hidden in thick grass and perhaps bracken. (There is something inside it...)

MEALL NA H-IOLAIRE

The climb up Meall na h-Iolaire (pronounced *miowl na hulara,* "hill of the eagle", 238m) is well worthwhile, but does require reasonable fitness and surefootedness. The hill is a fine viewpoint (p33) and has some impressive erratics (p9). It can be climbed on its own or as part of a long circuit. The main **Hill Path** is rough and wet in places but not too difficult. The **Hill Climb** is steep, and rocky in places; the path is like a deer path and you will need care to follow it. **You are asked to use it for ascent only**: in descent you are likely to cause erosion, and it is harder.

HILL PATH *(about 1 km to the top)*

Take the main **Stile** path as above and turn right at the first path junction.

Follow a small path through bracken, a good area for flowers in season, including Meadowsweet, Lady's Mantle and Ragwort. This soon turns sharp right, and Roundhouse 2, a Neolithic/Bronze Age work area, is immediately on the right. Then the path turns sharp left (at a corner which is flooded after heavy rain); Bronze Age Roundhouse 1 is at this second turn, on the right. The path now becomes a wider track, probably made for peat gatherers (p20).

Climb the winding track uphill. When it levels off, turn sharp left on the rough track which makes a rising traverse across the hillside. This section of the path was built or enlarged for tree-planting access, and is unfortunately badly eroded; but this has allowed flowers such as Yellow Saxifrage to grow. You pass below a remarkably balanced erratic (p9 picture): if it falls, where will it finish up? The path-digging has exposed two glacial features: ice-smoothed rock, and sandy glacial "till", the mineral basis of soil, under the thin layer of peat (p9-10).

Finally you reach the burn, **Alltan an Tuirc**. Notice evidence of old water-courses where boulders have been exposed, mostly sandstone. The route climbs to the left of the burn, up to more level ground.

Then go left, straight uphill on a sometimes boggy route which soon climbs steeply through heather, aiming for the left end of a small cliff. Skirt the small cliff to its left, turn right, and follow the rough path uphill through heather. There is some evidence of peat-cutting here.

Ahead you will see another rock outcrop. Pass this to its right, then turn left and continue up to the summit past several rock outcrops (roche moutonnée, p10) and two fine erratics (Torridonian breccia and gneiss, p8-9). BEWARE: shallow tree-planting holes in the ground everywhere (but very few trees: the planting has failed here because of wind and poor soil). You may see grouse around here, and look for an eagle soaring over the hills beyond (p30-31).

In clear weather there is a fine view in all directions: see page 33. For details of the geology of the view, see pages 10-11. Return the same way.

HILL CLIMB

*This is an alternative harder route for **ascent** only. PLEASE DO NOT COME DOWN IT: you are likely to cause erosion at several points, and you will find it much harder downhill.*

The route starts uphill opposite the east corner of the **Fank**. Climb through bracken, crossing the edge of Roundhouse 3; up a small side path beyond there is a ritual area (p3). Bear left through heather up to the foot of a cliff (amphibolite, p8).

Follow the foot of the cliff, a good place for flowers, climbing partly on scree (***please try not to dislodge it***), up to a slight shoulder; on the way up notice the wind-carved heather growing to your left. Cross a steep heather slope to an obvious wide gap in the cliff, where orchids, mountain everlasting, a larch tree and a wild rose grow. Climb up this gap with care (beware slippery rock) through the first rock band to an eroded ledge, probably dug out by or for sheep (p20).

From the left of this sheep scrape climb some way up and across a heathery peaty hillside, following the path carefully. *The small hill on the right, **Cnoc nam Fitheach** ("Hill of the Ravens"), is an optional steep heathery scramble.*

Once past the small hill, continue past two patches of willow scrub and up to a second rock band. Climb a tricky step up to the right (hands needed, and plenty of good footholds; for an easier but rougher alternative follow the rock to the right), and then up left to a large erratic boulder (pink gneiss, picture p8).

Follow the path up to the left end of a third rock band, crossing a line of exposed boulders (sandstone and gneiss). Reach the summit by an unexpected rightward rising ledge: **take care!** For the views, see p10-11 and p33. Beware tree-planting holes even here (but very few trees!).

Descend by the easier **Hill Path** above. To start, go past the two large erratics (gneiss and Torridonian breccia: p8-9) and then a separate ice-carved rock outcrop; after this, turn right.

Winter view south from Meall na h-Iolaire

OTHER WALKS

According to Scottish Access Law, you are entitled to walk anywhere in this area or beyond it as long as you exercise common sense and responsibility.

Beyond this area, between Meall na h-Iolaire and Flowerdale and to the east, there is a large area of lochs, small hills and moor, with ten hills over 300m. ***There are no marked paths here and the walking can be rough and wet*** *(and there is probably no phone reception): again, you* ***walk at your own risk****. And remember those tree-planting holes! A 1:25,000 map is useful if you want to explore; some Grid References (GR) are given below.*

• **The Old Wood (p28).** A slow sometimes very rough ramble through its upper section. From the main path after it first reaches the Old Wood, a small path climbs uphill just inside the wood to near its top. Then traverse the slope, finding a way around many fallen trees, until you reach a fair-sized burn with waterfalls (Allt nan Luibean Bana). When you've seen enough of the wood, either return the same way, or follow this burn down on either side and try to find a way back left to the path across a shambles of tree remains and ditches.

• **Above Gair Loch.** Take the Hill Path (p3) past Roundhouses 2 and 1 and on up the track to the level area. Instead of taking the traverse path left, go straight on round the side of the hill Meall nan Uan. There is a faint tree-planters' track if you can follow it. After crossing a wall (the other end of the farm boundary wall, p19) you come to a wide terrace above Gair Loch. From this various rough routes can be taken. There is a prominent small hill at the far end; a burn leads up difficult ground to the left of this to Lochan Dubha na Moine (GR 812762): see the Three Lochans walk overleaf. A short way down an earlier burn there is a ruin (GR 809765), probably a small cottage (p18), above the Gairloch Hotel.

• **Beyond Meall na h-Iolaire.** From the summit descend the least steep side of the hill, south-eastwards. Then follow a series of small hills as far as you like. After the first you come across a fine heap of sandstone erratics (GR 814768, picture p8), and further on there are slopes of similar boulders to the right. Ahead to the left you will notice several lochs which may entice you further, starting with Loch Clair (GR 819765, picture below). And beyond this there are five miles of wonderfully complex wild country before Loch Maree!

• **Three Lochans.** The burn Alltan an Tuirc has its source in a lochan. Take the Hill Path until you are below the final climb, then follow the burn or a faint tree-planting track to reach a flat boggy area. Cross the burn and circle or cross this area to regain the track, which is briefly bulldozed. It is reasonably clear as it crosses the burn yet again and then a much larger flat area (old peat-cutting where the burn is in a ditch) and climbs up the other side past a very bent fence-post (notice the spectacular slopes of erratic sandstone boulders to your left). Soon after this, leave the track and bear right to a large triangular boulder and on over rough ground to the first lochan (GR 814765), which is in two parts. The second lochan is just beyond, to the left / south. From this go SW about 250m over a slight rise to Lochan Dubha na Moine (GR 812762); this has a small dam, and the burn was probably an early water supply for the Gairloch Hotel.

• **To Flowerdale.** Take the route decribed above to the second of the Three Lochans. Now comes the tricky part! You have to head SE for about 500 metres, aiming for the obvious rocky dome of the hill An Groban which shows beyond and to the right of the nearer Meall Fuaraidh (p33 view). There is in fact a tree-planting track all the way, but it is often faint and boggy; in general you head for and follow the right edge of a wide flat area (via GR 818762). You should finally come across a clearer track, which takes you down a glen to a wood. Cross a possibly slippery bridge over the Allt Loch a' Mhuilinn (GR 819758), and descend the track through woods (badly damaged by the 2005 and 2015 storms) to emerge at a fence. Turn right, and pass behind Flowerdale House; then either bear left for the Flowerdale paths and the Old Inn, or bear right for the Church of Scotland and the beach/golf club car park.

Small hills and lochs beyond Meall na h-Iolaire; the nearest loch is Loch Clair

GEOLOGY

Map on page 12

To a geologist Scotland is an unusually exciting country, with an extraordinary variety of rocks and landforms. It has taken three billion years to develop, starting south of the equator and finally being assembled out of five pieces about 400 million years ago — when it also joined England for the first time. For much of its life it belonged to the American continent, but about 200 million years ago the Atlantic Ocean started to open and America moved off to the west (it is still moving away, 1–2 centimetres a year!).

North-west Scotland is the oldest part of Britain. It only just survived when a huge land movement pushed the Moine rocks of eastern Scotland westwards. Luckily the movement stopped before reaching Loch Maree and left the north-west alone (although it created geological chaos along its front).

More recently, the Ice Age brought huge glaciers which put the finishing touches to the wonderful landscape we see today.

The best place to study the variety of rock types is in roundhouse remains.

Key Dates (*years ago*)

Note that many rocks are covered by Lichens (p27), hiding their true colour.

3 - 1.6 billion **LEWISIAN COMPLEX ROCKS FORMED**

Lewisian Gneiss NE of Gairloch, looking towards Tollie Rock

1200-950 million **TORRIDONIAN SANDSTONE LAID DOWN**

A sandstone terrace on Beinn Dearg, Torridon; the ridge of Liathach beyond

430 million **MOINE THRUST**

The Moine Thrust turned these rocks upside down: older Torridonian above younger Cambrian Quartzite on Sgorr Ruadh, Coulin

30,000-11,500 **GLACIERS SHAPE THE PRESENT LAND FORMS**

Loch Maree with its islands, and the sandstone tower of Slioch beyond

The rock in this area belongs to the **LEWISIAN COMPLEX**. The Lewisian rocks are the oldest in Western Europe (the world's oldest, in Canada and Australia, are up to a billion years older); they are **metamorphic** rocks, altered from their original state while buried up to 40km deep in the earth's crust, and then lifted to the surface by earth movements.

The most common and the oldest Lewisian rock, up to 3 billion years old, is **GNEISS** (pronounced *nice*), which started as granite-like rock. You can see it, for example, in the crags across Loch Tollaidh on the road to Poolewe, and in this area as erratic boulders. It is very variable, but most often pink, grey or white; there are frequent darker ("mafic") patches or dykes included in it.

In this area, the rock is not Gneiss: it belongs to the complicated and much-studied "**Loch Maree Group**" of younger Lewisian rocks.

The rock here is AMPHIBOLITE, 2 billion years old. It started as basalt erupted under the ocean, and was metamorphosed into a green Hornblende Schist, which becomes grey after weathering. It is largely composed of the minerals hornblende and plagioclase feldspar, with some veins of quartz, and shows clear vertical layers ("foliation").

The less rocky area beyond the paths (including the Old Wood) is underlain by a band of **SEMIPELITE**. This also started on the sea-bottom, as sedimentary rock (Greywacke) which was metamorphosed into a grey Biotite Schist, rust-coloured after weathering. It is softer than the Amphibolite and so was more liable to erosion in the Ice Age. This band reaches Flowerdale, where it is best seen in the waterfall area ("Flowerdale Schist").

The Lewisian rock here used to be covered by thick layers of hard **TORRIDONIAN SANDSTONE**. This reddish billion-year-old rock was removed from this area by millions of years of erosion and by glaciers in the Ice Age, but you can still see it in numerous erratic boulders, and in the mountains seen from the top of Meall na h-Iolaire (p10-11). The colour comes from feldspar and iron.

It was made from the eroded remains of Lewisian mountains, the ancient Grenville Range (parts survive in America) and other rocks, laid down in river flood plains and lakes in a desert region near the equator, when Scotland was part of the ancient continent of Laurentia. It is remarkable that it has lasted so long without being metamorphosed. If you study Slioch from across Loch Maree, you can see in cross-section how the Torridonian was deposited on an original Lewisian landscape.

Lewisian Gneiss erratic on the Hill Climb

Amphibolite cliff and scree on the Hill Climb

Torridonian Sandstone north of the Poolewe road

Torridonian erratics and Amphibolite hills beyond Meall na h-Iolaire

Gneiss, Amphibolite, Sandstone

Torridonian Breccia erratic on ice-worn Amphibolite, Meall na h-Iolaire: a billion year old scree slope?

Shattered cliff of Cambrian Quartzite on Beinn Eighe

Glen Docherty leads down through the Moine Thrust to Kinlochewe

The scarily balanced boulder (Amphibolite) above the Hill Path

Some of the oldest ("basal") Torridonian layers are conglomerate "breccia" rather than pure sandstone: that is, made of chunks of the original rock. These started as slopes or fields of scree. There is a fine erratic breccia boulder on top of Meall na h-Iolaire (*see picture*).

[On top of the Torridonian a layer of **Cambrian Quartzite** was laid down in the sea about 500 million years ago; this is a hard white (iron-less) sandstone, seen on Beinn Eighe and as a topping on other hills. None in this area.]

These rocks are found only in the North West corner of Scotland: they are what survived when 430 million years ago tectonic plate movement caused the **MOINE THRUST**, a westerly land movement of about 100km which covered much of the Northern Highlands area with Moine Schist (a rock made of the same materials as Torridonian Sandstone, but laid down under the sea and then metamorphosed). At this time the ancient plate or continent of Baltica was colliding with Laurentia, which included North America and Scotland, and creating the ancient Caledonian mountain range. Luckily the Thrust stopped near Kinlochewe; if it had continued, this corner of Scotland would be much less interesting!

The **ICE AGE** started 2.5 million years ago, but it is only the last phases which shaped most of our landscape: a major ice sheet 30,000-14,700 years ago, the "Wester Ross Re-advance" about 16,000 years ago, and the "Loch Lomond Re-advance" 12,900-11,500 years ago. Glaciers from these ice-caps flowed generally west or north-west, tending to follow old river valleys or fault lines such as the Loch Maree Fault. They carried rocks which turned them into giant sheets of sandpaper. They left behind "moraines" (heaps of rubble) and "till" which is the basis of soil — see the eroded bank on the Hill Path, where above the sandy till there is only a thin layer of peat (formed mostly by moss, the first plant to grow).

Evidence of glaciation in this area to look out for:

• **Erratic Boulders.** Erratics are boulders made from non-local rock, which have been carried and dropped by glaciers. In this area most are Torridonian Sandstone, but many are Lewisian Gneiss or Amphibolite. A good place to see them collected is in the remains of some of the roundhouses, especially R8.

On both hill paths you can see evidence that when the glaciers left, much of the surface was covered in boulders: look where the soil or peat has been stripped away by the burn or erosion. There are impressive piles of sandstone boulders in the small hills SE of Meall na h-Iolaire which are worth visiting (p6, *picture p8)*.

• **Ice-worn Rock.** Much of the rock has been smoothed by ice, and sometimes you can see faint striations (scratches) made by stones carried in the ice. Above the path as you approach the Old Wood there are some especially polished slabs. Also study the smoothed rock half way up the Hill Path where there are some very faint striations.

Roche Moutonnée on Meall na h-Iolaire: ice moving right to left

• **Roche Moutonnée.** On top of Meall na h-Iolaire there are rounded rock ridges with one end "plucked" off by the ice to make a vertical face. From it you can tell that the ice here was moving WSW, towards the sea. (It is named after the shape of an 18th-century French wig style which used sheep fat!)

Cliff on the fault-line: new rock-fall, probably caused by tree growth

Fault

You can see evidence of a geological Fault, a major split in the rock (shown on the map): it shows in a clear line of crags south of R1, and then forms the second rock band on the Hill Climb. This created a line of weakness which was exploited by a glacier which later flowed in roughly the same direction. The other two rock bands crossed on the Hill Climb may also be fault-related.

THE GEOLOGICAL VIEW FROM MEALL NA H-IOLAIRE

(see also page 33)

The **NEARBY SMALL HILLS** are all Lewisian, either Amphibolite or the lighter-coloured Gneiss. This rocky landcape is known as "knock and lochan" — small hills and lochs. The highest hill in the district reaches 420 metres. The flat valley below to the north and east is underlain by softer Semipelite rock.

Cnoc and Lochan in the area SE of Meall na h-Iolaire

Almost all the **HIGHER MAINLAND HILLS** you can see are made of Torridonian Sandstone, which after glaciation forms steep isolated ridges (glaciers tend to follow the line of old rivers or faults). The tops of the highest of these were above the ice ("nunataks") in the last Ice Age, surviving as jagged pinnacle ridges.

The Corrag Bhuidhe pinnacle ridge on An Teallach (nunataks)

NORTH AND SOUTH OF GAIR LOCH the two flat peninsulas are also mostly Torridonian Sandstone, as is Longa Island at the mouth of the loch. There are also Torridonian exposures visible nearer at hand: on the village shore, and in strange square-cut crags to the left of the road to Poolewe (*picture, p8*). On the coast the strata tend to slope westwards into the sea, because of faulting in the Minch.

Coastal sandstone below the road to Rubha Reidh lighthouse

The basalt Shiant Islands; Harris and Lewis beyond

The **OUTER HEBRIDES** across the Minch — Lewis and Harris — are, of course, made of Lewisian rock, which reaches 799 metres on Clisham.

SKYE and the SMALLER ISLANDS which you can see are different. They are made of igneous rocks, from volcanoes which erupted through the Gneiss and Sandstone about 60 million years ago, when the Atlantic Ocean started to widen (the hot spot which caused this is now creating Iceland).

The **Trotternish** ridge on Skye opposite Gair Loch shows the biggest land-slip feature in Britain: the basalt cliffs have collapsed to create a remarkable landscape (including the Storr pinnacles and the Quiraing). Below them is Jurassic sedimentary rock in which dinosaur footprints and other fossils have been found.

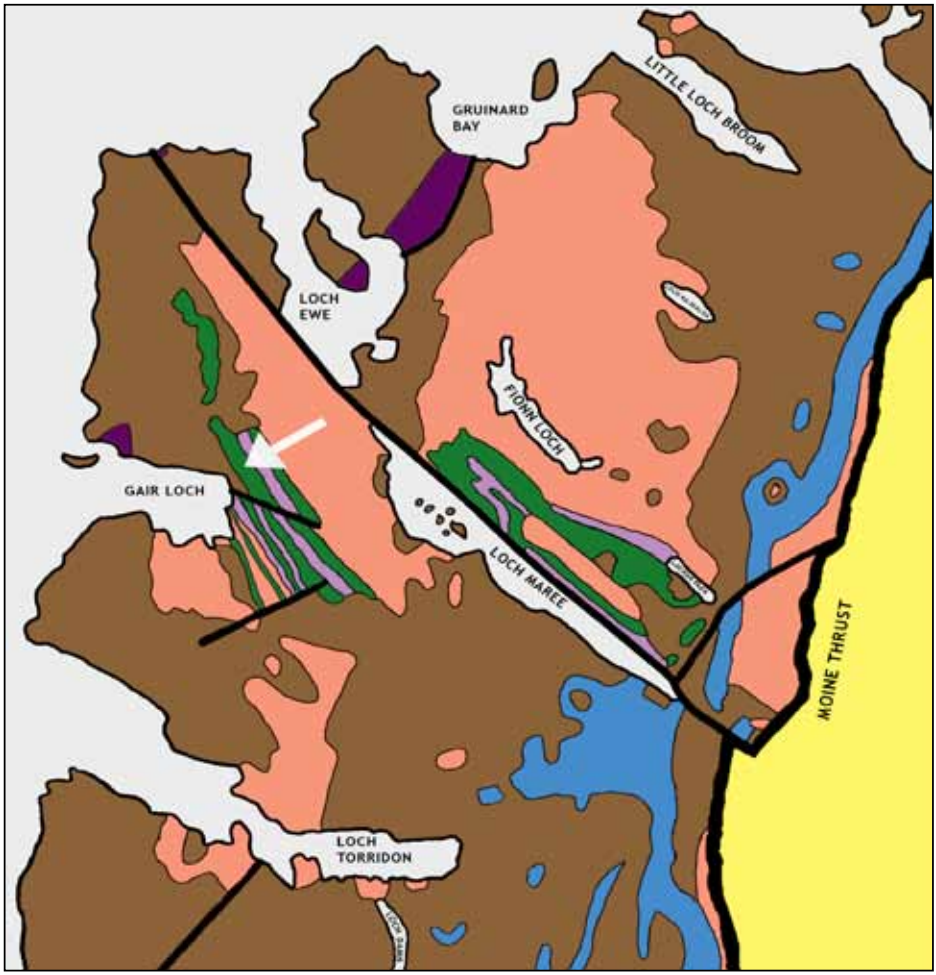
The Cuillin Hills further south in Skye are the eroded roots of volcanoes, made of Granite (the Red Cuillin) and Gabbro (the Black Cuillin) from deep underground.

The Quiraing on the Trotternish ridge

The Torridonian mountain Baosbheinn (875m) is prominent in the view to the south: its NW face was formed by massive landslips in post-glacial times, and the debris can be seen below it (the biggest "pro-talus rampart" in the UK).

Simplified Geological Map of the Gairloch district

(the white arrow indicates the Achtercairn Paths area)



This bit of the world has done an unusual amount of travelling! It has been around much of the planet, at the bottom of an ocean, miles underground, in a desert, in fresh water lakes, buried deep under sandstone, smothered by ice miles thick...

*These pages can only give a brief introduction. For a more thorough account see the companion guide booklet "**Wester Ross Rocks**".*

ARCHAEOLOGY

Map on Cover

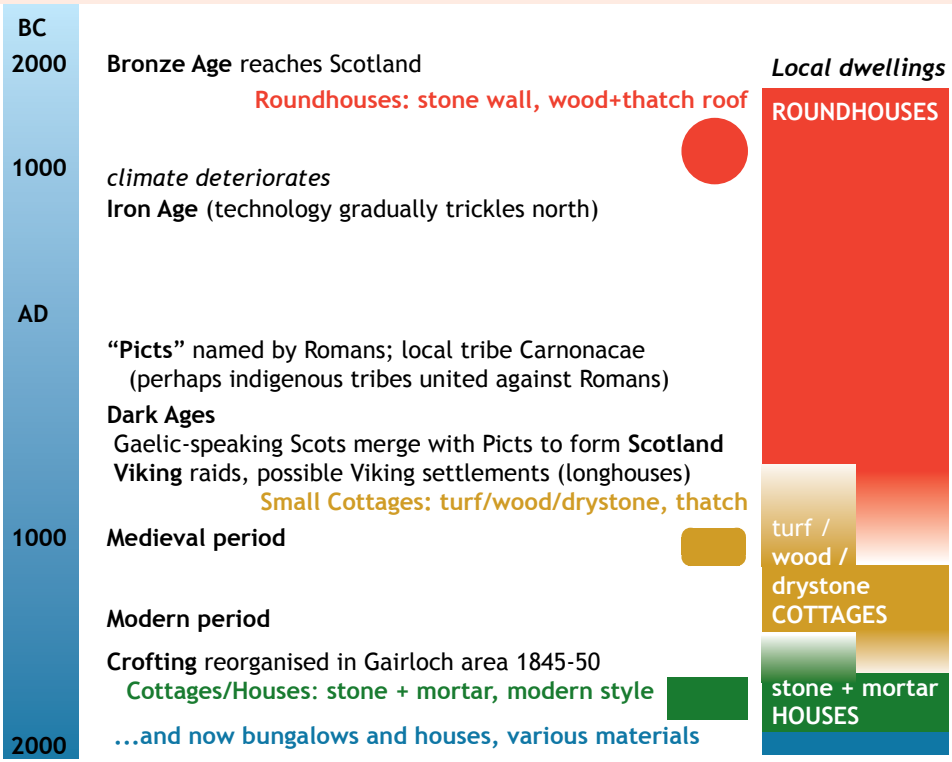
The Gairloch area as a whole is rich in archaeological remains, especially of Bronze/Iron Age roundhouses and 19th century crofts.

The remains of more than 125 roundhouses have so far been found within 8 miles of Gairloch, with the biggest concentration inland from Big Sand. Many have associated walled field systems. The relatively high number surviving and visible is partly explained by the lack of disturbance by forestry and farming in comparison with elsewhere, but also it must have been a popular district.

After the roundhouses, the evidence at first is scant: shielings, traces of simple cottages, walls and signs of agriculture, surprisingly no Viking remains yet found. Then in the mid-19th century the crofting was reorganised by Gairloch Estate, and the improved cottages (or their ruins) survive in large numbers.

The small, accessible and fertile **Achtercairn Paths** area gives a good picture of the earlier stages: ten roundhouses, associated field systems etc, later shieling huts and animal pens, re-used fields with lazybed or rig-and-furrow agriculture, one probable cottage foundation. But there was no crofting here; instead it became part of Achtercairn Farm and was used for grazing of cattle and then sheep. In 2002 the area became part of the Baile Mor tree planting scheme.

WARNING! In Archaeology, the key word is "perhaps"! Unlike History, it does not deal in precise facts or dates. Theories and interpretation of the evidence are always open to question.



ROUNDHOUSES

Roundhouse model

The ten prehistoric "Roundhouses" in this area are the meagre remains of the original houses, also called "hut circles". They should perhaps be called "round structures" because they were not all houses (see R2 and R8). Three have been carbon-dated; the rest are assumed to be Bronze or Iron Age, and may have been used even later. It is unlikely that they were all built or used at the same time; some may be replacements of others. The inhabitants were farmers; this area was certainly once good farmland as is shown by the evidence of all the walls and of later agriculture.

The wall was normally made of stone, or two stone facings filled in with earth or rubble, from 1 to 2 metres thick and perhaps about 1 metre high. The entrance usually faced SE. No roofs have survived, but they were probably conical, on wooden rafters resting on the wall and normally supported by an inner ring of wooden posts; they were thatched with heather, bracken, straw, rushes etc. Large houses may have had a wooden platform as an upper floor. There was one entrance, often with an extended porch to shelter it, most commonly facing south-east. In houses there was a hearth fire on a stone platform or on the ground in the centre of the floor (charcoal from this may be used for carbon-dating); smoke filtered through the roof. Water often had to be carried some distance.

This design was remarkably popular all over Scotland; it was strong, quick to build, and easy to plan (rectangles are harder to draw!). The shape is also found in the Crannog, a roundhouse built over water; and in the Broch, which is probably a status-enhancing and defensive development of the roundhouse. Oddly, no Brochs have been found near Gairloch (the nearest are at Applecross and near Ullapool). Ordinary roundhouses of our type have been named "Simple Atlantic Roundhouses" to distinguish them from "Complex" brochs, and from roundhouses elsewhere which have wooden walls.

R8 before and after vegetation clearance

To build an Atlantic roundhouse, you need stones and wood. There are plenty of stones in this area, either lying around or dug out during field clearance; no doubt the stones of abandoned houses were recycled. The source of straight trees for roof beams is less certain, but the existence of so many roundhouses in the district implies that there were many more trees then than now. Doors were sometimes blocked when a house was abandoned.

Later, stones from old roundhouse walls here were often used for building by later farmers; some roundhouses' walls were used, for example as animal pens; often many stones have fallen from the wall (these are known as "tumble"); soil and stones have slipped downhill. As a result the roundhouses in this area are typically visible only as low rings on a more or less flat platform. Some of them have now been wholly or partly cleared of vegetation; in others part of the wall has been de-turfed.

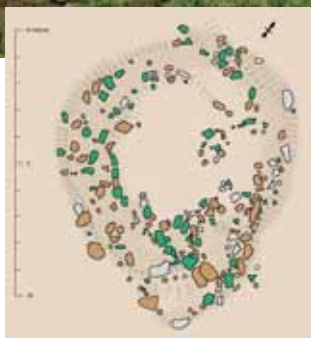
In the following descriptions the outside diameter is given first.

For more information, see the booklet "Roundhouses of Wester Ross".

Roundhouse 1 : 726 BC *(Late Bronze Age)*

8m. 5m from the Hill Path above an old fence-post. In a prominent position on a slightly raised platform.

The most obvious feature is the SE entrance area, which has too many stones and no obvious doorway. It may be an extended entrance passage, now collapsed or blocked, with a platform (patio) outside.



An archaeological dig took place here in October 2012, as part of the Wee Digs project. A trench was dug right across the structure from north to south. It was discovered that the original roundhouse here had an earth wall and floor (brown glacial till) — an unusual find. It had later been rebuilt with a stone wall on top of the earth one and a new clay floor ***(date above, from charcoal)***. Several stone tools were found.

On this plan, the stones are colour-coded for geology: green = amphibolite, brown = sandstone, white = gneiss

Roundhouse 2 : 2769 BC *(Late Neolithic Age)* and 1390 BC *(Middle Bronze Age)*

6m, the smallest. 3m from the Hill Path. Very irregular stones. Two possible entrances.

This is not a house. Two excavations revealed :

(1) A burnt area, a cobbled area, and a quartz assemblage (80 chipped pieces) including a shaped borer. Charcoal gave a Neolithic date.
(2) Charcoal dated to Middle Bronze Age was found just under the wall, so it must be later.

Roundhouse 3 and ?Ritual Area

10m. The Hill Climb path crosses its edge.

This was badly damaged by tree-planting, and probably many stones were robbed for building the Fank. It has a fine outlook, sited on the only flat space on this hillside. The large field ***F4*** probably belongs to it.

About 20m above it, up a small path, is an area which may have been used for some kind of ritual activity. The large standing stone (probably naturally upright) may have been significant for the roundhouse dwellers, and just beyond it there is indeed a small stone circle. We can not tell what happened there.

Roundhouse 4

12m. 30m from the main path along a side path. A clear raised hollow. In Field ***F5***, although the visible field walls are later.

The wall is almost completely buried in turf; some has been cleared to show the stones beneath. The obvious entrance is towards the wood, NE; but this seems to have been made by later farmers, and the original SE entrance is blocked by a huge stone (perhaps a doorpost). There is a small structure, perhaps a later lambing pen, outside to the NW.

Roundhouse 5

9m. 3m from the path, 10m before a rock outcrop which gives it shelter. In Field ***F5***, like R4.

This is a raised platform with some visible wall stones (part has been cleared), but most stones have probably been taken for nearby later wall-building. The entrance, probably extended, can be made out to the SE.

Roundhouse 6 and Cairn

8m. 5m from the path, beyond a mysterious line of boulders, sheltered by a small hill. Was damaged by tree-planting.

This has been cleared to show the wall; many of the orthostats (upright slabs) forming the inner facing have survived. There is a clear extended and possibly cobbled SE entrance.

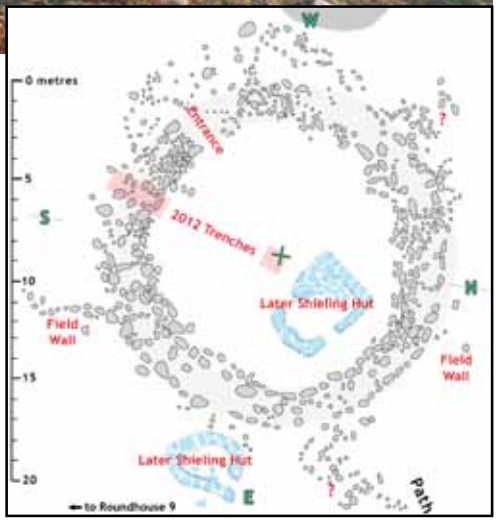
The most conspicuous feature is the large heap of stones. Loose stones have been removed from this, revealing that this cairn was built against the wall on the original house floor, perhaps when the house was abandoned. This unusual feature may be a burial mound, perhaps for the last owner of the house.

Roundhouse 7

11m. 11m from the path, south of a small hill.

This is unclear, buried in heather; part has been cleared to show the rather narrow wall. Try walking round it to feel the rest with your feet. The entrance is SE, as usual, beside a gorse bush. The roof would be visible from the sea, unless there were trees here. Field ***F5*** is nearby, perhaps associated with it.

Roundhouse 8 : 254 and 213 BC *(Middle Iron Age)*



17.5m. This is by far the biggest. It was investigated in June 2012 as part of the Wee Digs project; trenches were dug across the wall and in the centre. Enough evidence has now been collected to attempt an interpretation.

- Entrance facing SW (all others are SE), into the prevailing weather.
- Exceptional scale: diameter, wall thickness, size of wall stones.
- No trace of an occupation floor found by archaeology.
- Hearth fires in the centre ***(dates above)*** exceptionally large and hot: a deep layer of reddened soil. Dangerous under a thatched roof!

The probable conclusion is that this was not a dwelling house and did not have a roof; it was a very large stone circle, a monumental wall perhaps 1.5m high. The entrance points directly at the midwinter solstice sunset. It seems likely to have been an Iron Age **ceremonial or sacred enclosure**, a kind of Wester Ross "henge".

The skyline of the Trotternish ridge over the sea is likely to have had significance for inhabitants in this area: it acts as a calendar as the sunset travels along it. At midwinter a fire may have been burnt to encourage the sun's return northwards.

Roundhouse 9 : 477 BC *(Early Iron Age)*

13m. Over a slight col to the south of R8, along an animal path. A later wall crosses its edge.

This was found from satellite photography, and is unclear on the ground. It has few remaining stones (some cleared) but a definite platform. There is a SE entrance, probably extended. The fine hearth has been dug and left exposed.

Roundhouse 10

Far from the others, so far uncleared (2017), and very unclear. Discover it yourself if you can get at it (p3). What is inside it?

FARMING

Post-Roundhouse Dwellings

Roundhouses may have continued in use surprisingly late, but they began to be replaced by small rectangular one-room cottages with rounded corners; made of turf, wood and wattle-and-daub on a stone base, or later drystone (stone with no mortar); thatched; no windows ("hovels", said outsiders). This change of shape may have been influenced by the Vikings (no Romans or Saxons here!) who built turf longhouses with stone bases, although no Viking remains have yet been found near Gairloch, in spite of Norse names ending in *-dale*, *-aig* etc. There is one site in this area, NW of R8, which is probably the remains of the stone base for such a **cottage**; it is undated — perhaps 18th century. There is no other sign that anyone lived permanently in this area.

Walls

Prehistoric. There are a lot of walls here! Most of the old walls which criss-cross this area seem likely to have been built originally by the roundhouse builders. These consist of rather large stones, which are often upright and separate, sometimes called "dog's tooth"; they may have been simple land boundary markers, or may have been completed with turf, wood etc to make proper walls.


Prehistoric "dog's tooth" wall

Later. Many of the original walls were adapted by later farmers by adding more stones, turf, wattles etc. The most recent walls are drystone (mortar-less) dykes, mostly now ruined (e.g. the 1800 wall up the hill from An Achlais, and probably ***F5***); the Fank is a fine example of the technique. There were also probably some turf dykes in boggy areas, which barely survive (e.g. ***F6*** north). It is impossible to date most of the walls.

Fields

The eleven or more fields (***F1-11*** are on the map) may all have been created by the roundhouse builders, e.g. for barley or (AD) oats and rye, or for their cattle and sheep.

Many were re-used later. ***F4, 5, 6, 10 and 11*** and some other places now show evidence of post-roundhouse cultivation — ridges ("rigs") and ditches, ***A*** on the map; this is best seen when a low sun casts shadows and the bracken is down. Seaweed was used to fertilise the thin soil. Smaller ridges made by hand are called lazybeds (*lazy* here means *uncultivated* as the ground below the ridges was not dug up); wider rig and furrow cultivation was done by plough. Crops such as oats, barley and (from about 1750) potatoes would be grown.

F1 and ***F3*** are very small, and may have been animal enclosures. The rigs just north-east of the Fank in ***F4***, crossed by the Shortcut path, are virtually terraces. ***F6*** has lazybeds, but is now a very poor, boggy field; there has also been peat cutting here. ***F8*** seems unsuitable for animals (cliffs) or crops (little soil): was it a defensive area, a *dun*? ***F11*** is the clearest rig and furrow field.

The ridges we can see now represent the most recent cultivation. They may have been part of the "runrig" system: communal fields whose rigs were allocated annually by lot. Or they may have been made by the Farm (below), or by shieling users.

Shielings

The most important domestic animals were small black cattle, along with sheep and goats. They were taken into the hills in summer to the summer pasture areas, the "shielings", while crops were grown in the fields below, and then back down to the fields in winter (this process, called transhumance, is still seen in the Alps).


Structure on wall below Roundhouse 8

There is evidence that there were shielings in this area, in spite of its closeness to wherever the farmers lived. They are from before 1800, when Achtercairn Farm was set up (see below). All the livestock, even hens, would be brought up here in summer: it was a busy place!

• There are the remains of various **small structures**. These could be tent-like huts for those who looked after the animals; or stores for equipment used for farming or milking or cheese-making, or indeed for cheeses; or shelters or roof-less pens for animals. The clearest structures are at R8 (p17): an older D-shaped hut outside, a newer rectangular one inside, an animal pen below. Others are on the first part of the Hill Path.

• Two fields have traditional shieling names given on the 1875 OS map: **Achadh Airigh nan Eun** (Field of the Shieling of the Bird, *F5*), used until at least 1850. There is also Field of the Blacksmith's Shieling Land just inside the Old Wood.

How the shielings relate to the arable fields here is a matter of speculation, although on shieling land there were sometimes hill fields used for growing crops.

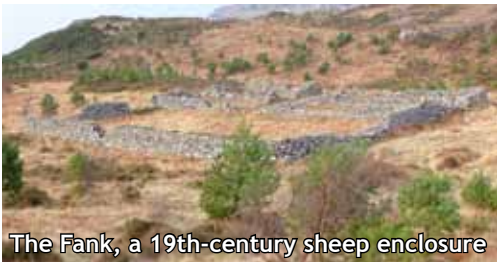
Achtercairn Farm: 1800

The New Farm. The Gairloch Estate records of 1800 tell of the setting-up of a farm, rented by Kenneth MacPherson from the estate for £30 a year and taking in all the former 17 smallholdings of Achtercairn plus "all the Shieling and Grazing belonging to them", i.e. this area. (One hopes that the former inhabitants were employed by the farm or given new homes!) The main farm comprised the lower fields, which are half built over today by the village. This upper area was presumably used as hill grazing for the farm's cattle; perhaps some of the fields were also still used for crops.

The farmer was to build "stone dykes of four foot high on either side" as a boundary. This probably explains the extraordinary ruined wall which climbs from An Achlais high up round the east side of the hill, and eventually descends beyond R10 (it makes a challenging exploratory scramble to follow it, although much is buried). Like many walls around here it makes use of naturally placed rocks and cliff lines where possible.

Crofting. In **1845-50** the Gairloch Estate reorganised crofting, replacing the cottage and runrig system with separate four-acre smallholdings and improved houses; some people were relocated, but there were no serious "clearances" on this estate. The crofts were all beyond Achtercairn River, and the farm and this area were unaffected.

Cattle. Each year a proportion of the cattle from local crofters, and now also from the farm, were driven to market in Easter Ross, whence they might be taken on


The Fank, a 19th-century sheep enclosure

to the south; the income paid the crofters' rents. The drove route was to Poolewe, across the River Ewe, and to Kinlochewe by a route north of Loch Maree. The area east of the Cattle Grid is named on an old map **Buaile na Tuatha**, Cattle-fold of the Tenantry: presumably this was where the cattle were gathered before setting out to Poolewe.

Sheep. Around **1850** sheep were introduced (later than elsewhere), and the grazing area was greatly enlarged; the farm has a shepherd in the census of 1851, and two in 1861. The very fine Fank (a Scots word for a sheep enclosure) must have been built at this time, probably by the Estate for the farmer, Peter Robertson; it appears on the 1875 OS map (the first) as a "sheepfold". Sheep were taken to Dingwall Market on foot until 1938 when a lorry was first used. The Fank was last used in 1944, and a modern replacement was made beyond R10. You can see the remains of several sheep fences.

Now that the area is part of the **tree-planting scheme** (p28), it is no longer used for any kind of farming. The end of grazing has allowed vegetation to flourish (excessively?).

TRACKS

Above Stile to Old Wood

This path follows the old road to Poolewe. There must have been an earlier route for cattle-drovers, postmen and others, but the first road was completed in 1830. In the Old Wood the road is lost, but it emerges on the A832 main road beyond the Quarry; then it takes the pass to the north of the A832 (where wheel-marks can be seen in the rock!) before descending to join it near Loch Tollaidh.

One section in this area seems to have been moved. The route originally appears to have gone to the north of the Fank, then as a well-made section of the Shortcut path, across the Alltan na h-Achlaise burn and along its north side, before entering field ***F5*** through a gate which is now blocked with stones (so the field was used later) and leaving the field where the path enters it. It is not known why or when it was moved.

The road here was replaced by the route of the present A832 up Achtercairn Brae. The reason was probably to cater for the wheeled vehicles which had at last reached Gairloch in 1849 with the building of the "Destitution Road" along Loch Maree, one of four key roads built here to create employment during a potato famine.

Old Wood to Cattle Grid

This path follows the line of a well-built track for much of the way, but is not marked on any maps. Perhaps it was built when the main Poolewe road was moved from its old route to the present route, to maintain access to fields.
(The path south from the Cattle Grid was probably made by the tree-planters' vehicles.)

Hill Path

Above R1 this looks like another old track, probably to a peat cutting area further inland (a "peat track"); but it was enlarged for the tree-planting scheme (p28). Evidence of the enlargement is seen in boulders which have been dug out and moved aside, showing a "tide-line" where they were below ground and no lichen grew. The digging has caused water erosion in the middle section.

PLANTS

The Amphibolite rock of which this area is made breaks down to produce reasonably fertile soil, and there is a fine crop of flowers from April to September. These pages show most of the Wildflowers you are likely to see, plus a selection from other plant groups: Grasses, Sedges, Rushes; Ferns; Mosses; Lichens; Trees; etc.

The photographs are not to scale; all were taken in this area. The more common flowers are shown roughly in order of first flowering. The Latin name of each is added (*Genus* and *species*): this is the only name which is recognised internationally.

Three flowers are not given, because everyone should know them! But even these are not so simple...

- There are two kinds of **Buttercup** found here (Creeping and Meadow: *Ranunculus repens* and *acris*).
- The **Daisy** Family (*Compositae*) is the world's largest family of flowering plants with over 14,000 species, from Thistles to Dandelions and from Ragwort to the common Daisy itself (*Bellis perennis*).
- The **Dandelion** comes in several hundred forms ("micro-species"). However, the Dandelion-like flowers you see here are more likely to be Cat's-ears, or perhaps Hawkbits.

A Few Flower Facts:

Carnivorous flowers! Two small flowers add to their diet by catching and digesting insects (such as Midges, usefully). Sundew attracts them with drops of sweet juice and then traps them with its hairs. Butterwort leaves are covered with a sticky juice which acts like fly-paper. Look for them on wet ground.

Bluebell Confusion. The Bluebell found here is the English Bluebell, called Wild Hyacinth in Scotland. The Scottish Bluebell is called Harebell in England.

County Flower. The Bog Asphodel (*left*) is the county flower of Ross-shire, to which Gairloch belongs. It was used as a source of yellow dye.

Useful Plants. Selfheal was used as a medicine (obviously), Lady's Bedstraw (tradition says) as bedding for the infant Jesus, Eyebright to make an eye-bath, Tormentil roots to tan leather, Sphagnum Moss as a wound dressing in wartime, Pignut roots dug up by children as food; and Bog Myrtle leaves are still used to make insect repellent.

Devil's Bite. Devil's-bit Scabious has a root which looks as if it has been bitten off. It was said that the Devil did this, jealous of its healing powers.

A Challenge: How many of the seven "Worts" can you find flowering?

APRIL

Primula vulgaris

Primrose

Ranunculus ficaria

Celandine

Viola riviniana

Dog-violet

Oxalis acetosella

Wood Sorrel
(edible leaves)

MAY

Anemone nemorosa

Wood Anemone

Hyacinthoides non-scripta

Wild Hyacinth
(Bluebell)

Potentilla erecta

Tormentil

Pinguicula vulgaris

Butterwort
(insect-eating)

Polygala serpyllifolia

Heath Milkwort

Dactylorhiza purpurella

Heath Spotted
Orchid
(varies, white to pink)

Gymnadenia conopsea

Fragrant Orchid
(scented)

Pedicularis sylvatica

Lousewort

Alchemilla vulgaris

Lady's Mantle

Veronica officinalis

Heath Speedwell

Veronica chamaedrys

Germander
Speedwell

Conopodium majus

Pignut


Ranunculus flammula
Lesser Spearwort


Galium saxatile
Heath Bedstraw


Lotus corniculatus
Bird's Foot Trefoil
(Bacon and Eggs)


Digitalis purpurea
Foxglove


Erica cinerea
Bell Heather


Erica tetralix
Cross Leaved
Heath


Saxifraga aizoides
Yellow Saxifrage


Prunella vulgaris
Selfheal


Thymus polytrichus
Wild Thyme


Valeriana officinalis
Valerian


Drosera intermedia
Oblong-leaved
Sundew
(insect-eating)


Hypericum pulchrum
Slender
St John's Wort


Achillea millefolium
Yarrow


Narthecium ossifragum
Bog Asphodel


Filipendia ulmaria
Meadowsweet


Senecio jacobaea
Ragwort

AUGUST


Calluna vulgaris
Ling
(Common Heather)

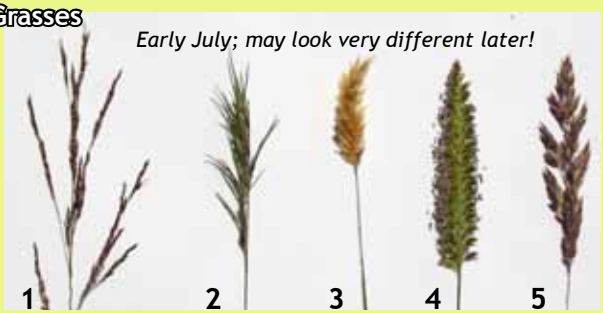

Centaurea nigra
Knapweed


Achillea ptarmica
Sneezewort


Succisa pratensis
Devil's-Bit Scabious

Grasses, Sedges, Rushes *(selection only)*

Grasses



1	Wavy Hair Grass	*Deschampsia flexuosa*
2	Viviparous Fescue	*Festuca vivipara*
3	Sweet Vernal	*Anthoxanthum odoratum*
4	Crested Dog's Tail	*Cynosurus cristatus*
5	Yorkshire Fog	*Holcus lanatus*

The tallest clumps are Tufted Hair Grass.


Molinia caerulea

Purple Moor Grass
Very common; often forms tussocks; leaves die in winter.

Sedges


Eriophorum vaginatum
Hare's Tail Cotton Grass


Eriophorum angustifolium
Common Cotton Grass


Trichophorum cespitosum

Deer Grass
Not a Grass but a Sedge!
Very common; in this area especially on the Hill and underfoot on the main paths.

Common Sedge
Carex nigra
&
Green-ribbed Sedge
Carex binervis

Rushes


Juncus effusus
Soft Rush


Schoenus nigricans
Black Bogrush

Sedge or Rush?
Most Sedges have three-sided stems, and most Rushes have round stems

Other flowering plants in this area which you may see, especially on the Hill routes:

Water Avens

Mountain Everlasting

Eyebright

Northern Bedstraw

Globeflower

English Stonecrop

Herb-Robert

Wood Sage

Sanicle

Fairy Flax

Dog Rose

Early Purple Orchid

Northern Marsh Orchid

Lesser Butterfly Orchid

Yellow Iris

Goldenrod

Sorrel

Lady's Bedstraw

Clover
(Red / White)

Pale Butterwort

Marsh Thistle

Sea Plantain
(& other Plantains)

Vetch

AND ALSO:

Willowherb, Broad-leaved
Bugle
Woundwort, Hedge
Thistle, Spear
Rattle, Yellow
White Heather (all 3 types)
Angelica, Wild
Marsh Marigold
Bitter Vetchling
Stitchwort, Greater
Pimpernel, Yellow
Cuckoo Flower
Small White Orchid

Shrub and Scrub


Ulex europaeus

Gorse / Whin


Salix sp.

Willows
(several varieties)


Juniperus sp.

Juniper


Myrica gale

Bog Myrtle
(scented leaves)


Hedera helix

Ivy


Rubus fruticosus agg.

Bramble ***(edible)***


Empetrum nigrum

Crowberry ***(edible)***


Vaccinium myrtillus

Blaeberry ***(edible)***

+ Holly, Hawthorn, Cotoneaster (garden escape), Wild Raspberry, Hazel, Aspen

Ferns *(selection)*


Blechnum spicant

Hard Fern
vertical fertile fronds
(very common here)


Oreopteris limbosperma

Lemon-scented or Mountain Fern
(very common here)


Athyrium filix-femina

Lady Fern
comma-like sori
(less common here)


Dryopteris filix-mas

Male Fern

(quite rare here)

Many Ferns are most easily identified by the "sori" (spore containers) on the underside of their fronds, as shown above. Other small ferns can be found, especially on the cliffs: **Maidenhair & Green Spleenworts, Common Polypody, Wall Rue**.

Bracken (*Pteridium aquilinum*)
This very successful Fern is a mixed blessing: it adds colour to the landscape — green in summer and golden-brown when the fronds die — but it spreads vigorously and is hard to control. This is because most of the plant is underground: its rhizomes (roots) are extremely hard to eradicate, and in a quarter kilometre square they can weigh up to 500 tons. The green shoots start appearing in late April, and fronds reach their full height in July. It rarely spores.

Mosses *(selection; very few have standard English names)*

Hylocomium

Hypnum

Pleurozium

Polytrichum

Racomitrium
Woolly Fringe Moss

Rhytidiadelphus

Sphagnum
(peat-forming)

The damp climate of the west is ideal for mosses to grow, in moorland, bogs and woodland. They have no roots, and so are often the first species to colonise bare ground and often grow on bare rock. There are about 700 species in Britain.

Lichens *(selection)*

Lichens cover most of the rock in the area. They are very hard to identify; only a few of them are shown here. A lichen is an association of two quite different organisms growing together: a fungus and an alga (a very small green plant). The alga makes food for both, from carbon dioxide, water, and minerals from rainwater (hence they grow best where there is the least air pollution). Lichens grow very slowly, 1-10 mm a year.

Lecidea

Platismatia

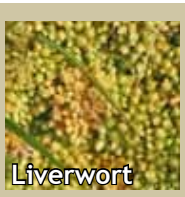
Ramalina

Cladonia: Reindeer Moss

Haematomma/Lecanora

Usnea: Old Man's Beard

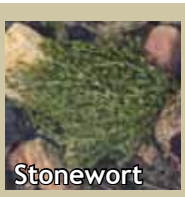
Some other types of plant



Bryophytes like moss, but simpler

Ancient leafless flowerless plants

Another ancient plant, not a moss



Green alga, growing under fresh water

TREES

THE OLD WOOD

This was planted in the 19th century by the Gairloch Estate. (It is named "Old" here to distinguish it from the new planting, but was known locally as "the Plantation".) The trees are Scots Pines and Larches. It has largely been ruined by storms, most recently in 2005. Much of the fallen timber has been extracted, but the area is still very hard to walk across. At the top of the wood there is an area which has not been harvested and is more sheltered from the west winds, although there are still many fallen trees. If you like your woods jungle-like, it makes a rewarding ramble (p5)!

THE NEW PLANTING

In 2002 the owner of Gairloch Estate, John Mackenzie, received a grant from the Forestry Commission under the Millennium Forest Scheme to plant 2.5 million trees in the area of 8000 acres which is enclosed between the A832 and Loch Maree. This followed a successful scheme south of the road near Loch Bad an Sgalaig, and completed the largest native woodland planting in Scotland. The aim was to add ecological value to an area which, with the demise of large-scale sheep-farming, had lost its use. The trees planted were: **Scots Pine** (just over half), **Birch** and **Rowan**, with some **Alder**, **Oak** and others. Seeds were sourced locally, for example from the islands of Loch Maree. The new forest was named Baile Mor (after the "Big Township", Flowerdale).

The planting, managed by the land management firm CKD Galbraith, was completed in 2007. This whole district was fenced to exclude deer and sheep, which can kill or damage trees by eating bark, leaves or buds (a very few red deer and roe deer have still managed to find their way in or evade exclusion). The trees were planted by the technique called "mounding": a hole is dug by hand or machine, the turf turned upside down next to the hole, and the tree planted on the turf, with a little fertiliser. There are still signs of the tracks made by wheeled vehicles which were used to dig the holes and transport the seedlings and fertiliser; a helicopter was also used for transport. It all took 64 man years of work.

There was no hope of creating an 8000 acre forest, since at least half of the boggy or rocky ground was unsuitable for planting, and in many higher areas much of the planting has failed because of poor weather or poor soil; here patches of scrub may develop in some sheltered spots. Below about 200m trees are doing better, though many pines are struggling, and the scene in this area will change year by year.

Scots Pine
Planted; evergreen conifer

Birch
Planted; Downy (most common here) or Silver

Rowan
Planted, but also self-seeded; red berries

Larch
Self-seeded from the Old Wood; deciduous conifer, non-native

ANIMALS

This area, as part of the tree-planting scheme (p28), is fenced off to prevent access by deer, sheep and cattle. These two pages give a very brief introduction to the wild animals which live or visit here. As the trees grow new species may flourish. *(* = illustrated)*


Rowan berries eaten by Pine Marten

MAMMALS

The best evidence of their presence in summer is tracks through the bracken, and in winter footprints in snow.

- **Pine Marten**: mostly nocturnal; travels widely; droppings ("scats") are dark, pointed and twisted; small piles of half-digested rowan berries* are common on paths; omnivorous, from berries to voles, and also enjoys peanut butter and raspberry jam. Not popular with those who keep hens.
- **Fox**: unlikely to be seen; droppings dark, larger than pine marten's and less twisted.
- **Badger**: digs "snuffle holes" * especially where pignuts and bluebells grow. There is one occasionally used sett in the area.
- **Roe Deer**: live in the area, though shy and rarely seen; look for trees with bark, buds or leaves eaten*.
- **Red Deer**: occasional visitor, jumping the fence from the Poolewe road.
- **Field Vole**: abundant, making burrows and networks of runways.
- Further inland, **Otter** paths can be seen linking the lochs; Brown Trout spawn in November in the small burns which feed these lochs.


Badger's snuffle hole


Roe deer damage


Large Black Slug

AMPHIBIANS and REPTILES

- You may see **Frog, Toad, Common Lizard, Slow Worm** (a legless Lizard).

MOLLUSCS

- Try not to walk on the **Large Black Slugs*** (adults 10-15cm long when extended) which seem to like lying in the middle of the path.


Golden-ringed Dragonfly

INSECTS and ARACHNIDS

- **Caterpillars**, mostly hairy ("woolly bears")*, of various moths, e.g. Oak Eggar (again, they like paths: beware!).
- **Dragonflies**: especially the easily seen Golden-ringed*, green-spotted Common Hawker, red/orange Common Darter.
- **Beetles**: the most common is the Ground Beetle*; also the round Dor Beetle, orange spotted Carrion Beetle, green Tiger Beetle.
- **Bees**, especially the small Heath Bumblebee.


Woolly Bear


Ground Beetle

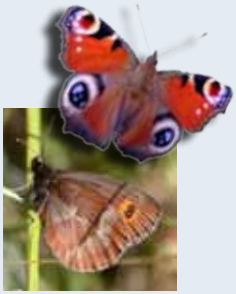
- **Butterflies and Moths**: many species, for example:


Six-spot Burnet Moth


Common Blue (female)


Small Pearl Bordered Fritillary

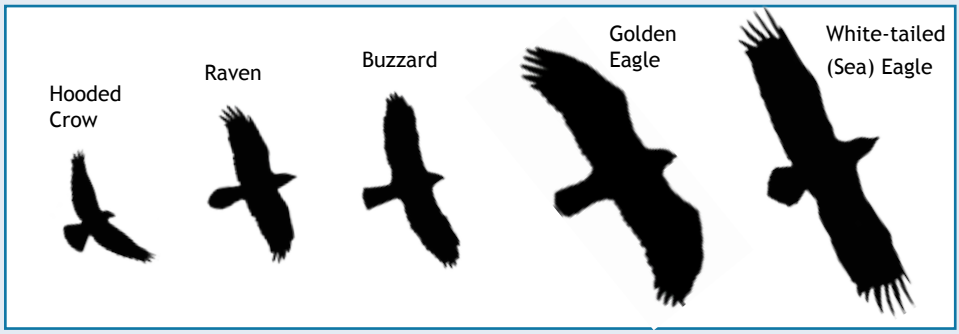

Small Tortoiseshell


Scotch Argus
above: Peacock

- **Midge** (*Culicoides impunctatus)*: a tiny fly, wingspan about 1.5mm. It emerges from damp ground (e.g. sphagnum moss), where the larvae develop (up to 700 per m^2) and hatch in May-October, with peaks around the start of June and of August. The females can lay some of their eggs using their own reserves, but need mammal blood to nourish the rest. They are attracted by CO_2 and animal smells. Their saliva contains histamine to enable more blood to flow. The males do not bite. They do not fly in bright light or wind over 5mph. (Try *Smidge* repellent!)
- **Tick**: a blood-sucking arachnid. There are not too many ticks here (no livestock), but be aware as they may be infected with Lyme disease. (*Tick removers* useful.)
- **Cleg**: this horse-fly appears briefly, around June. It has a painful bite but is much easier to spot and swat than a midge.

BIRDS

Birds are, of course, the easiest animals to spot; but some are usually seen high overhead, where it is tempting to think that every large bird is an eagle. It is not easy to distinguish high-flying shapes, but these typical silhouettes (to scale) may help a little. Note also that eagles rarely flap their wings.



Some of the birds seen in or above this area:

White-tailed or Sea Eagle: re-introduced, now may be five pairs nesting within 15 miles.

Golden Eagle: slightly smaller, two pairs may nest within 5 miles of here.

Buzzard: common bird of prey, has a distinctive mewing call.

Raven: largest crow, black, often seen “playing” in the air, loud croaking call.

Hooded Crow (“Hoodie”): partly grey, highland version of Carrion Crow, loud “caw”.

Pipit (bottom left) chasing two Cuckoos!

Typical views of Eagles: which is which?

Male Grouse near top of Meall na h-Iolaire

Grouse droppings

Bivouac for a cold night: Grouse snow hole

Cuckoo: common here, lays eggs in nests of Meadow Pipits, males call April-June.

Red-Throated Diver: flies high overhead between sea and nest on inland loch, quacking.

Seagulls: mostly Herring Gulls or Black-backed Gulls, often gliding around this area.

Geese: migrating in skeins overhead, north in April and south in late Sept/early Oct; some Greylags do not migrate but live and nest locally.

Red Grouse: several pairs live and nest around and on the Hill. *(see pictures above)*

Meadow Pipit: small brown birds, very common.

Lesser Redpoll: small, bright red forehead.

Willow Warbler: small, yellowish body, descending song; summer.

Grasshopper Warbler: secretive, but song a very distinctive non-stop trill; summer.

Stonechat: small, black head, sharp call 'hweet chac chac'; resident. *(see below)*

Wheatear: bigger, grey head and back, call 'chack chack'; summer only. *(see below)*

Wren: tiny, found everywhere, its rich and surprisingly loud song includes a trill.

Also: **Woodcock**
Tawny Owl
Sparrowhawk
Merlin
Collared Dove

Stonechat (male)

Wheatear (male)

Females, juveniles, and males outside the breeding period look different, with plainer plumage.

and typical garden birds such as **Blackbird, Song Thrush, Blue / Great / Coal Tits, Chaffinch, Greenfinch, Siskin, Robin, Dunnock, etc.**

If you have binoculars, check Gair Loch for:

Gannet (fishing, probably from St Kilda), **Eider** (large duck, male black and white, often in flocks), **Red-breasted Merganser** (crested duck, dives often), **Divers** (Red-throated, Black-throated and Great Northern), **Cormorants** (Shag and, less common, Cormorant), **Guillemot, Mallard,** Heron (crossing loch from colony on Shieldaig Island);

Harbour Porpoise (quite common), **Dolphin, Minke Whale**

And finally...

"Cuckoo Spit" foam has nothing to do with cuckoos. It is made by Froghopper or Spittle Bugs to enclose their young.

*For a more complete flora and fauna, see the companion guide booklet "**Wester Ross Rocks**".*

GAELIC PLACE-NAMES

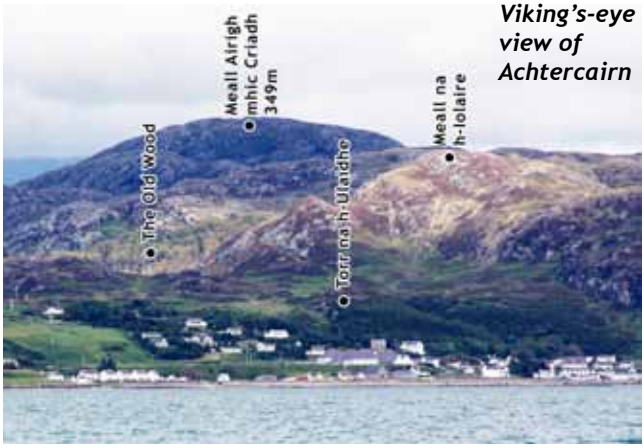
** These names are proposed for features not named on the Ordnance Survey maps*

Allt, alltan = burn (stream), small burn
Loch, lochan = lake, small lake
There are many words for "hill"; e.g. meall = rounded; cnoc/torr = small.

Achadh Airigh nan Eun	= field of the shieling of the bird
Achtercairn	*from* Achadh a' charn = field of the cairn
Alltan an Tuirc	= small burn of the boar (mis-spelt Tuire on OS maps)
Allt nan Easan Bana	= burn of the fair/white waterfalls
Alltan na h-Achlaise *	= small burn of the hollow *(altan na hachlaish)*
An Achlais	= the hollow; *literally* the armpit! (*an achlaish*)
Baile Mor	= big town/township, i.e. Flowerdale *(bala mor)*
Buaile na Tuatha	= cattle-fold of the tenantry *(bwala na tuaha)*
Cnoc nam Fitheach *	= small hill of the ravens (*croc nam fee-ach*)
Gairloch	*from* Gearr Loch = the short loch
Meall na h-Iolaire	= hill of the eagle (*miowl na hulara)*
Meall nan Uan	= hill of the lamb
Torr na h-Ulaidhe	= hill of the treasure (*tor na hooli)*

Torr na h-Ulaidhe

The rocky slopes and small hilltops between Achtercairn Brae and Roundhouse 9 are intriguingly called "Hill of the Treasure". In case visitors are tempted to start digging, a possible explanation is given here; its source is Dr Alexander Macintyre, writing in 1935 in the magazine An Gaidheal.



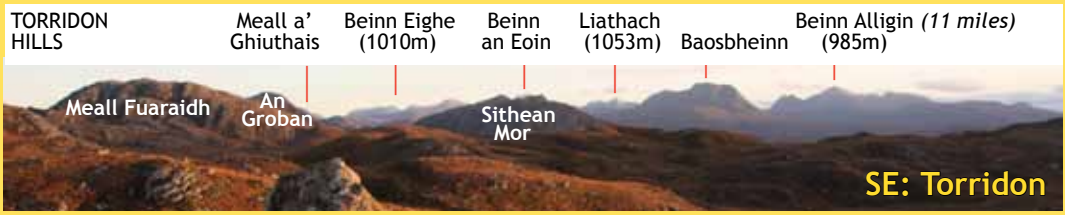
Viking's-eye view of Achtercairn

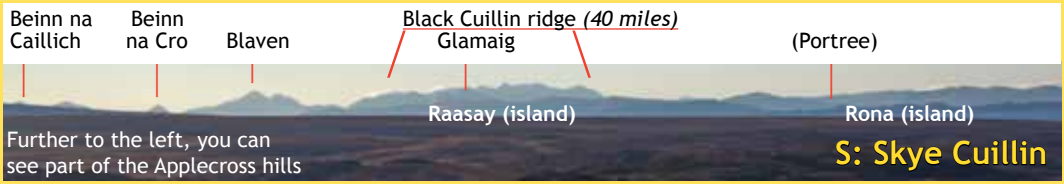
According to local folk-lore, he says, the people who lived down on the loch shore were forced to flee by an enemy attack from the sea, probably a Viking raid. They hastily gathered their "treasures" and headed inland. As soon as they were out of sight of the loch (i.e. somewhere in the area of Roundhouses 8 and 9), they buried their treasures to save having to carry them into the hills. Unfortunately for us they almost certainly recovered them later when the enemy left; and probably most of the "treasure" would be household implements and the like!

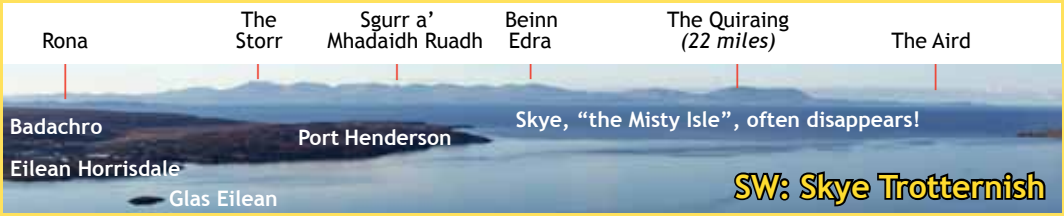
KNOWING OUR PLACE

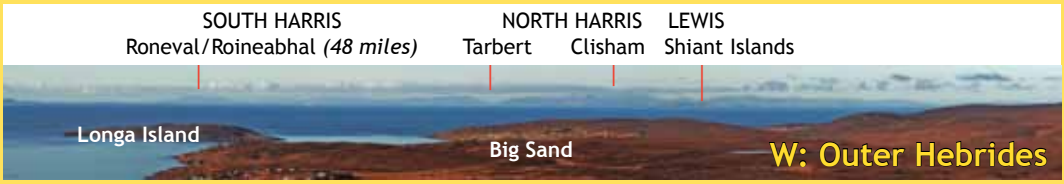
**Walk humbly in this place. We are
tiny moments treading on numberless years.
Feel the slow, crunching crash of continents,
the ruthless deep-down cookery of rocks,
the violent artistry of land-sculpting ice.
See the spreading of green on glen and hill,
softness of moss, dew-drop sparkle of flowers;
and the coming of life that crawls and runs and flies.
When all is ready the last act opens: men,
tilling and building, tending their cattle and crops,
living and dying, leaving to us only
stones and questions. Sense their harsh centuries
as you walk, and be grateful for softer days.**

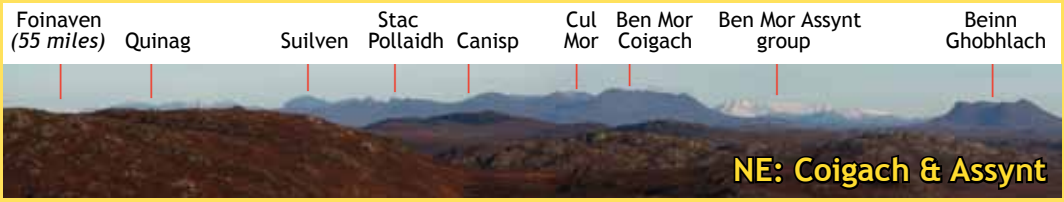
VIEWS from Meall na h-Iolaire *(hill of the eagle)*











= Main Path

GEOLOGY (p7-12)

G = Glacial feature

E = Notable Erratic

ARCHAEOLOGY (p13-20)

R = Roundhouse

F = Walled Fields

A = Agriculture

—— = Field Wall

- - - = possible wall

—— = rock used as wall

■ = Other Structures (Shielings etc)

• • • = Old Track/Road

0 metres 100 200

Produced by Jeremy Fenton, with thanks to Jim Buchanan, Peter Cunningham, James Fenton, Anne MacInnes, Graham Park, Anna Welti, Martin Wildgoose and others.
April 2017

A832 to Poolewe

Cattle Grid

View Point P

Bualle na Tuatha

Private Property

Achtercairn Brae

F10

R7

Cottage base

F9

R8

F7

F8

R9

F6

E

Alltan na h-Achlaise

F11

F4

Torr na h-Ulaidhe

F1

F2

Alltan an Tuirc or Allt nan Easan Bana

R2

R1

50

100

Hill Path

P Museum

McColls

P

START OF PATH

GALE Centre

Stile

Old Poolewe road

Gair Loch

N

W E

S