

Torrison & Shieldaig

in the Western Highlands of Scotland



The Torrison area of the Western Highlands (consisting of Loch Torrison and the smaller Loch Shieldaig) is situated on the west coast of Scotland, in Wester Ross. The area is well known to climbers, photographers, wildlife enthusiasts, hikers, and countless visitors from around the world, for what is considered to be some of the finest scenery in Europe. The mountains (Liathach, Beinn Alligin, Sgorr Ruadh, Maol Chean-deargare) are very nearly the highest in Britain, rising in places almost vertically to 3500 feet from the deep sea lochs. Many visitors to the area remark upon the unusual atmosphere - it is truly one of the world's rarest and special places.

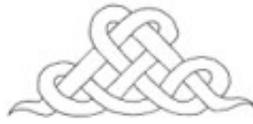


~ The Torrison hills as seen from near Ardheslaig ~

Torrison is 110 miles north of Fort William and 80 miles west of Inverness. The climate on the coast is surprisingly mild (given its northerly position) due to the influence of the Gulf stream. This has a huge effect on the area. Pampas grass and palm trees grow in an area that is as northerly as Oslo.

Being so remote, due to an ever declining population, and due to a climate that is, shall we say, often rather wet, the area is one of the finest to view rare wildlife, and to find some solitude whilst walking in the hills. It is still possible to walk all day without meeting another human - quite a feat on this crowded isle.

As for the weather, well, as a confirmed walker once said - 'There is no such thing as bad weather, just inappropriate clothing'.



Geology

The hills of Torrison are the oldest in Europe. Rock visible in the Torrison area is some of the oldest on Earth - hundreds of millions of years old - that predates life itself. Volcanic outpourings, massive climate changes, movement of the earth's crust, erosion, forestation, and finally the influence of mankind have all played their part in the scene that we view today. The landscape is in a permanent state of change and not, as we sometimes think, *here forever*.

The layer of 'Torrisonian Sandstone' which settled on the ancient rock and now makes up the bulk of the mountains that surround the area is actually rising at present, and has risen by about 70 metres since the end of the Ice Age when sea levels separated Britain from mainland Europe.

The vast tracts of Scots pine trees which spread and covered more than half the land mass have receded to a few acres on the banks of Upper Loch Torrison, and the wildlife that has survived, or indeed come to flourish in the area is uniquely suited to an environment that keeps most humans away.



Visiting Torrison

The road through Torrison village, takes you first past a beautifully situated village on the shores of Loch Torrison - Inver Alligin. In the past, illicit whisky distilling and smuggling were commonplace in Alligin. A naturally camouflaged cleft in the rock known as the Smuggler's Cave concealed any illegal activities from the attentions of the excisemen across the loch in Shieldaig.

The road continues westward, providing stunning views across Loch Torrison as well as views over the Isle of Skye, eventually grinding to a delightful halt in the charming fishing village of Diabaig, with its scattered hillside crofts, sheltered harbour and salmon farm. The village was used as a filming location for the Hollywood movie 'Loch Ness' - which is worth watching *solely* for the scenery (Ed.).

If you visit, be sure to call into the Torrison Countryside Centre, situated at the head of Loch Torrison. It contains lots of useful information on the area, its wildlife, and any local events that are forthcoming (like the boat race round Shieldaig island!)

Travelling east up Glen Torrison, (which follows the river A' Ghairbhe some 15 miles from the shores of Loch Torrison to Kinlochewe), one passes both the beautiful Coulin Estate and the Beinn Eighe nature reserve (which is the largest in Britain, covering over 10,000 acres - stretching from loch to mountain top).

An excellent track runs south from Glen Torrison, past Loch Clair, Loch Coulin, and eventually into Strathcarron. It is a right of way due to a legal battle in the 1930's. Originally cut for the use of the proprietor of Coulin Lodge to gain access to the railway in Glen Carron, it offers a beautiful walk through empty country, with Carn Breac on one side and Beinn Liath Mhor on the other. As you leave Glen Torrison, take a moment to glance back at the superb view of Beinn Eighe over Loch Clair.

Loch Torrison splits into two sea lochs, Upper Loch Torrison and Loch Shieldaig. On the banks of Loch Shieldaig sits Shieldaig village.



Shieldaig

Shieldaig village was actually built to 'raise' and train sailors to fight Napoleon. Grants were given for boats, and £2,700 was spent building the three main streets. Building started in 1810, but then Napoleon was defeated at Waterloo, and the brave men of Shieldaig were never asked to fight.

The church was built in 1825, and the school added at the end of that century. In 1893, the minister of Shieldaig broke away from the established church along with the minister of Raasay to form the Free Presbyterian Church.

At one time, the road ended at Shieldaig, and those intent on going north could only do so by boat as foot passengers to Torrison village, Inveralligin, or Diabaig. A track of sorts, suitable for walkers, led eastwards for eight miles along the southern shore of Upper Loch Torrison where a road could be joined again. In those days, Shieldaig to Torrison village by car necessitated a 60 mile detour via Lochcarron, Achnasheen and Kinlochewe.

The Shieldaig fishing industry is now limited to prawns and mussels - so the name Shieldaig ('Herring Bay') is rather redundant - although the herring gulls are fatter, but the sea still plays a vital role in the economy of the area and it is still a place where young people learn sea-faring skills. The original houses still exist and have been joined by several more as the village expands. Improved communications have opened up the area to tourism, but the population of the area of a whole is still falling. Shieldaig village now has about 85 full time occupants.

Shieldaig Island is covered with Scots pine which are thought to have been planted deliberately about 130 years ago to provide the village with poles for ships and fishing nets. The island is now a National Trust site of special scientific interest and has a thriving bird population, including Herons, Kestrels, Black Guillemots, Long Eared Owls and Mergansers.

The road from Shieldaig takes you over the highest mountain passes in Britain, onto the Applecross peninsular - one of the most remote places in Western Europe, which has stunning views over to Raasay, Rona and Skye (and some great beaches).

If you are visiting the area and need a guide to explore the Torrison mountains you should consider contacting Jim Sutherland. His website is www.nineonesix.co.uk

The place names around Torrison are derived from Gaelic or the Norse occupation:

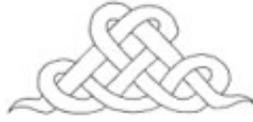
Torrison - Place of transference

Shieldaig - Herring Bay

Alligin - Jewel or Pretty Woman

Diabaig - Deep bay

Annat - Mother Church



Climate

The Torridon area of the Western Highlands of Scotland is driest and sunniest in May and June, and coldest and wettest in December and January.

Due mainly to the hilly nature of the terrain and the regularity of low-pressure systems approaching from the Atlantic, the West Highlands of Scotland tend to be cloudier and wetter than eastern Scotland or England. However the coastal fringe benefits not only from the influence of the Gulf Stream which keeps the temperature much warmer than it should be given its latitude, but also has a much lower rainfall and greater amount of dry and sunny weather than is found even a few miles inland, where the hills will cause the air to rise and the rain to fall.

With an annual average of less than 1,100 hours of sunshine over the mountains of the Highland region it is the most cloudy area of mainland Britain. Mean daily sunshine figures reach a maximum in May or June, and are at their lowest in December.

Although winter days are very short, this is amply compensated by long summer days with an extended twilight. On the longest day there is no complete darkness in the north of Scotland. The Torridon area has about three hours more daylight (including twilight) at midsummer than London.

Rainfall can vary from over 120 inches per year over the hills in the Highlands (comparable with rainfall over the mountains of the English Lake District and Snowdonia in Wales) to less than half that on the west coast fringe.

The most common direction from which the wind blows in Scotland is the southwest, but the wind direction often changes markedly from day to day with the passage of weather systems. In general, wind speed increases with height, with the strongest winds being observed over the summits of hills and mountains. Since many of the major Atlantic depressions pass close to or over Scotland, the frequency of strong winds and gales is higher than in other parts of the United Kingdom. Over low ground, the northwest coast has over 30 days with gales per year in some places.

In general, January and February are the coldest months. The daytime maximum temperatures over low ground in the Highlands in January and February average around 5 to 7 °C, but on rare occasions in the lee of high ground, temperatures can reach up to around 15°C when a moist south or southwesterly airflow warms up after crossing the mountains, an effect known as the föhn after its more dramatic manifestations in the Alps. The lowest temperatures occur inland, away from the moderating influence of the sea, in valleys into which the cold air drains, but obviously as one gains height as one moves inland, the temperature falls.

Snow rarely lies on the ground at sea level before November or after April, and on the coast it is rare - on average for less than 10 days a year. However, over the mountains snow typically lies for more than 50 days a year. Serious difficulties with roads blocked by snow are, fortunately, not common on low ground, but some higher roads in Scotland are regularly affected each year - this can affect the west east route from the Torridon area to Inverness.

On the highest summits, such as Liathach, snow cover typically persists for around five months of the year.

(Figures - Met Office)



History

Torridon can be seen as the gateway to the Torridonian Highlands and the ancient rocks of that unusually geologically twisted landscape. The red sandstone of Torridon is one of the oldest rocks in the world, having been laid down 750 million years ago. In some places, it is capped by a hard, white quartzite.

There are records that show that Queen Victoria loved to travel the road between Torridon and Diabaig in the late nineteenth century. Accompanied by John Brown, amongst others, she described this area as a fine and wild uncivilised spot, like the end of the world, as she wrote in her diary, and she noted that “hardly anyone ever comes here”.

Sadly, the area was victim to some particularly heartless clearances in these glens, especially when the estate was sold in 1831 to Colonel McBarnet who had made his wealth exploiting plantation workers in the West Indies. The tenant farmers were immediately cleared off to allow sheep farming, and were only left with a tiny amount of land to grow potatoes. McBarnet ruled that that no tenant could keep any sheep or cattle, and the only cow was kept at the Inn. Eventually, in 1859, all the inhabitants of the area were resettled at Annat, at the head of the loch, on land taken from the already pitifully small holdings of the people there, land that was already exhausted and liable to flooding. Meanwhile, the inhabitants of Alligin, a previously prosperous village were ordered by McBarnet to give up their sheep. Crofters were only allowed to keep one cow - and its calf for six months. After that, they were deprived of a quarter of their arable land which was given to incoming shepherds.

The estate was later sold to Duncan Darroch, a wealthy man from Gourrock, near Glasgow. Fortune changed again – this time, for the better. Darroch wanted a deer forest, not a sheep farm, and he saw no conflict between crofters and the presence of deer. He also believed that sheep ruined the mountain grazings for deer and cattle. So he cleared off the sheep, restored the lower grazings to the crofters and allowed their cattle to share the hill grazings with the deer. He gave land to the previously evicted tenants at Torridon. He also fenced off the crafting land so that deer could not eat the growing crops. He allocated peat bogs for the old and new villages, and gave positive encouragement (instead of forbidding) the collection of seaweed for fertilizer. He lent the tenants money for the purpose of buying cattle or for building boats.

Duncan Darroch died at Torridon House in 1910. On a stone by the roadside just beyond Torridon, his widow placed the words:

“In memory of the devotion and affection shown by one hundred men on the estate of Torridon, who, at their request, carried his body from the house here on its way to interment in the family burial place at Gourrock.”

Soon after buying the estate, Darroch had sold off the Ben Damh section to the Earl of Lovelace. So when Torridon was bought after his death by Lord Woolavington, it was only the north side of the loch that was involved. His actual name was James Buchanan whose fortune had been made in the Black and White whisky company. He did not visit Torridon very much, and sold it to Sir Charles Blair Gordon of Montreal. He died in 1939 and eight years later the estate was sold to Richard Gunter from Yorkshire, who moved live in Torridon. When he died in 1960, the Earl of Lovelace then bought over torridon to add to the Ben Damh property that one of his predecessorshad acquired when Duncan Darroch separated it from the northern part of the estate. After Ben Damh House was converted into a hotel, the Lovelaces came to live at Torridon House; when the fourth Earl died in 1964, Torridon was accepted by the Inland Revenue in part payment of death duty, and was transferred three years later to the National Trust for Scotland. The hotel is currently run by Dan Rose Bristow.



Shieldaig is situated at the head of Loch Shieldaig which is itself an inlet of Loch Torrison, which stretches north-westwards out towards open sea, flanked by the Torrisonian Mountains on its north-east side, and the hills of North Applecross on the other.

Shieldaig was not originally built by the dispossessed crofters from the nearby glens, as were most coastal villages. It was constructed in Napoleonic times (around 1800) specifically to provide and train sailors for the Royal Navy. This was the idea of the Duke of Argyll who was a member of the Board of Admiralty. The site was considered to be a good position for a village. There were already some local cattle farmers living there, living on long leases from Mackenzie of Applecross. At first, no one could be found to build the village, and it was not until 1810 that the construction began.

The government gave generous grants for boat-building, guaranteed prices for fish supplies, adequate quantities of duty-free salt, plenty of land for all tenants, and a new road to connect Shieldaig with Kishorn and Lochcarron. The people who came to live in Shieldaig did well. They were able to build large boats in order to fish in the outer waters, and the salt allowed them to cure their fish catches at low cost before being sent southwards to markets.

By the time that the new village was fully functioning, the threat that Napoleon had posed had slipped away; there is no record of how many sailors from Shieldaig joined the Royal Navy.

Shieldaig was considered to be one of the finest villages on the west coast at this time, but sadly, things were to change. The Mackenzies of Applecross sold their large estates to the Duke of Leeds. His wife was one of the family who had been responsible for the cruel Sutherland clearances. She allowed her gamekeeper to prioritise sheep-farmers over mariners and sailors. He instigated new rules whereby cattle-grazing was taken away from the smaller tenants and added to sheep farms that were rented out to the innkeeper and a local merchant. The fishermen and crofters became poor. When the Duke of Leeds broke up the Applecross property into smaller sections, the Lochcarron estate, including the village of Shieldaig was sold to Sir John Stewart. His sons went deerstalking in Glenshieldaig forest and dispossessed many of the Shieldaig tenants, taking over their houses for estate use. Most of the land was rented out to incoming sheep farmers.

By the 1860s, there only remained one offshore fishing boat remaining – the inhabitants of Shieldaig were too poor to make any more although the fishing remained good. The estate was criticized by the Royal Commission for allowing cartloads of shingle from the shore of the loch to be taken away for road-building and ballast. The villagers were worried that their protection from storm tides was being removed. By then the stone pier that had been built by the Destitution Board during the potato famine in the 1840s was still standing, but lack of maintenance by the estate had allowed it to crumble away significantly.

The Lochcarron estate was eventually sold to the Murrays, and Shieldaig fared much better.

Until the early 1960s the road from Lochcarron stopped at Shieldaig. Then a road was built to link with the Glen Torrison road that meets up with the main route from Achnasheen to Gairloch.