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**Other trails and sites of interest in the Northern Highlands include: The Peatlands Project, Forsinard; The Borgie Woodland Trail; The Ord Trail, Lairg; The Yarrows Trail, Caithness.**

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## Strathnaver Trail


Explore the fascinating landscape of Strathnaver, in the North Highlands... an area of beauty, steeped in history...



### TRAIL MAP

with introduction & site notes





To visitors, Strathnaver can seem wild, empty and remote. But this appearance is deceptive: hidden in its landscape are features from all periods of history. This Trail explores some of them...

Strathnaver is the broad, fertile valley of the River Naver, which flows from Loch Naver northwards to the sea at Bettyhill on the north coast of Scotland.

It was once an important place and it gave its name to a medieval province, which as early maps show, stretched along the north coast of Scotland from Cape Wrath to Caithness. Strathnaver was the land of the Mackays, and it lay on the trade route between Scandinavia and Ireland. 'Sutherland' - the 'South Land' of the Vikings - referred originally only to the south east coast of the modern county, but gradually Strathnaver was absorbed.

In the 19th century, Strathnaver became infamous for the Clearances when the Gaelic-speaking local people were thrown out of their traditional lands to make way for commercial sheep farming. Some of them were 'resettled' on the coast and

expected to take up sea fishing - although the coast is dangerous and very few had any boats, equipment, knowledge or experience to help them. Many moved away to Glasgow, England, America, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Clearances occurred all over the highlands, but the Strathnaver ones are probably the best known - partly because of the work of Donald Macleod (site 3). The Strathnaver Trail takes in several of the ruined villages from this time (sites 1,2,5,8,13).

The earliest sites on the Trail date to the Neolithic (New Stone Age) about 6000 - 4,400 years ago, when the first farmers cleared the land of trees and rocks to grow barley and other crops. Some of the stones were

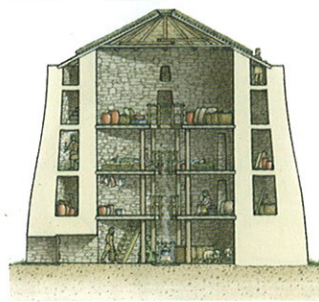


built into magnificent cairns containing chambered tombs (sites 2,9,12).

From about 4,400 years ago travelling metalworkers began to trade their products. Initially these were made of bronze (a mixture of copper and tin). From the Bronze Age there are the first visible remains of round houses (hut circles) for families to live in (sites 5, 8). Bronze Age people also put up standing stones and stone circles (site 6).

Iron began to be available from about 2,600 years ago. The Iron Age has produced the first evidence of conflict in Strathnaver - fortified round towers, unique to Scotland, known as brochs, dating from about 200 BC to 200 AD (site 11). England, and much of Europe, was ruled by the Romans at this time - perhaps the brochs

helped local people maintain their independence, or perhaps they were just status symbols.



Christianity was brought to Scotland by priests from Ireland in the 6th and 7th centuries AD. The Red Priest's stone (site 9) is supposed to mark the grave of St. Maelrubha (642-722) who founded the Abbey of Applecross and was the most important saint in Northern Scotland after St. Columba - at least 21 churches are dedicated to him. St. Columba's church at Bettyhill Strathnaver Museum, and dates to 1774, but there has been a church recorded here since at least 1223. The magnificent 8th century carved stone cross in the graveyard shows this was probably another early Christian site (site 16).

In the 9th century the Vikings conquered Strathnaver and it became part of the Norwegian

Earldom of Orkney. But the kings of Scots gradually extended their power and in the late 12th century they defeated the Earl's forces at Dalharrold (site 7).

The later medieval period saw the area dominated by the Mackay clan. They could at one time muster 800 fighting men. Like other parts of the highlands, over the centuries Strathnaver has produced exceptional soldiers to fight in various armies. The monument to the 93<sup>rd</sup> Sutherland Highlanders (site 10) records the raising of a famous British regiment, while the War Memorial at Bettyhill (site 15) commemorates those who died in 20th century wars.

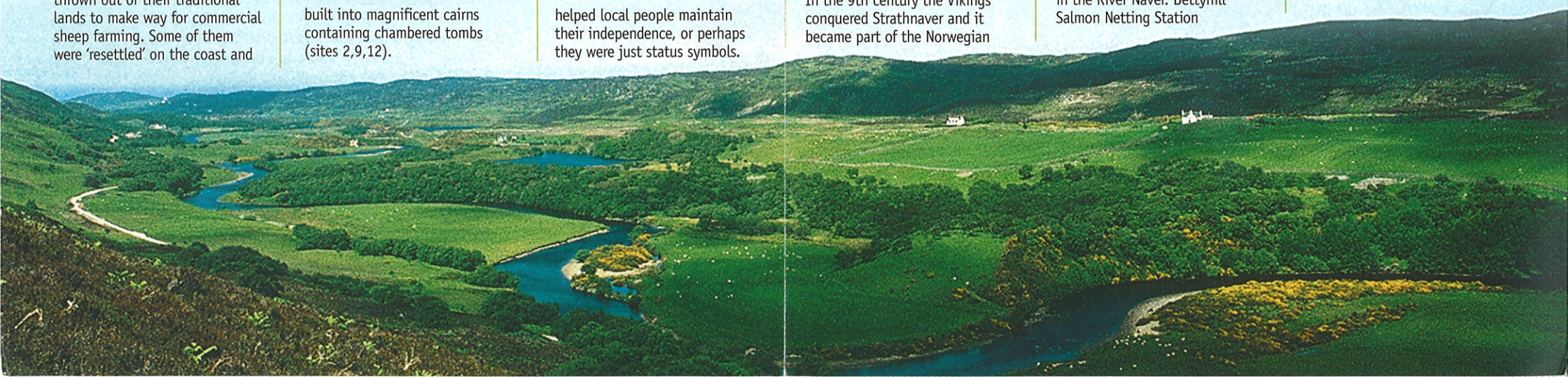
The Reformation in the 16th century meant that many smaller churches and chapels were destroyed or abandoned. In the 19th century the little corrugated iron church was built at Syre to provide for the congregation there (site 4).

Finally, for centuries people in Strathnaver have caught salmon in the River Naver. Bettyhill Salmon Netting Station

operated until recently, and the Ice House and other buildings can still be seen (site 14).

Strathnaver today continues to reflect the past as it changes and develops. At Bettyhill the field patterns are those imposed at the time of the Clearances, but elsewhere they reflect holdings created by the government in the early 20th century for descendants of the original inhabitants to buy. 20th century forestry plantations can be seen here and there, while crofting is still a way of life for local people. Every part of this landscape is in active use.

Underlying it all are some of the most ancient rocks on Earth, smoothed and carved by ice and water, then covered with boulder clay, sands and gravels left by glaciers. The sea has carved a coast of spectacular cliffs and unspoilt beaches of dazzling sand. The Strathnaver Trail takes you through this landscape and it is well worth the trip.





## Strathnaver Trail Sites

### 1. GRUMMORE SETTLEMENT

Grummore, like many of the sites along the Trail, was emptied of its people in the early 19th Century to clear ground for sheep farming. The nearby broch – fortified tower – is around 2000 years old and shows how long people had lived in this area.

975m (2/3 mile) over rough grazing & timber boardwalks

### 2. GRUMBEG BURIAL GROUND, SETTLEMENT & CHAMBERED CAIRN

Grumbeg was also a pre-Clearance settlement with roots going back to an even more distant past. Among its 19th Century ruins is the remains of a chambered tomb, which is between 4400, and 6000 years old.

540m (1/3 mile) over rough grazing & timber boardwalks

### 3. 'GLOOMY MEMORIES' MEMORIAL

Donald Macleod was born in Rosal and personally witnessed the Clearances. Later, he went on to write widely and passionately about these events. 'Gloomy Memories' was the collected version of his writings.

10m (11yds) over rough grazing

### 4. SYRE & SYRE CHURCH

The corrugated iron church at Syre once formed an interesting architectural grouping with 'Patrick Sellar's House' to the west and the 'Big Barn' – a huge sheep-handling shed – to the south. The other two buildings have been largely demolished but the little church still stands.

### 5. ROSAL SETTLEMENT, SOUTERRAIN & HUT CIRCLES

Rosal was one of the largest of the 50 or so pre-Clearance townships of Strathnaver and has an excellent trail of its own along an easy mile's walk.

3.25km (2 miles) along track and over rough grazing

### 6. CLACH AN RIGH STONE CIRCLE

Bronze Age people created great stone settings and circles all over Europe. Clach an Righ is a tiny example of this with the addition of a small cairn in its centre.

4km (2 1/2 miles) along track from car park

### 7. DALHARROLD BATTLEFIELD

Strathnaver was once at the sharp end of conflict between the Norse Earls of Orkney and the Kings of Scotland, who





struggled for control of the area. Here, at Dalharrald, they met in battle and the Norsemen were defeated.

**4km (2½ miles) along track from car park**

#### 8. TRUDERSCAIG SETTLEMENT & 2 HUT CIRCLE SETTLEMENTS

Truderscaig, like Grummore, Grumbeg and Rosal, was, for hundreds – perhaps thousands – of years, the home of a stable, pastoral community.

**8.9km (5½ miles) along track from car park**

#### 9. SKAIL CHAMBERED CAIRN, CHAPEL, BURIAL GROUND & RED PRIEST'S STONE

Christianity came early to the far North of Scotland, carried by priests and holy men from Ireland. At Skail there is evidence of an ancient burial ground, the remnants of a pre-Reformation chapel and the legend of Maol Ruadh – the Red Priest – who also left his mark at Applecross in Wester Ross.

**Cairn 990m (2⅔ mile), Chapel, Burial Ground & Red Priest's Stone 280m (306yds) over rough grazing & stiles**

#### 10. 93RD SUTHERLAND HIGHLANDERS

This monument, originally at Syre, commemorates the raising of a famous regiment – the 93rd. Sutherland Highlanders.

#### 11. ACHCOILLENABORGIE BROCH

Between 100BC to 100AD many hundreds of 'Brochs' were built in north and west Scotland. This one, at Achcoillenaborgie, once dominated the surrounding landscape but is now in a very tumbledown state.

**150m (170yds) over rough grazing**

#### 12. COILLE NA BORGIE HORNED CHAMBERED CAIRNS

Neolithic people (about 6000-4400 years ago) built huge chambered tombs and kept these in use for hundreds of years. There are two here at Coille na Borgie.

**160m (175yds) along an inclined track**

#### 13. ACHANLOCHY SETTLEMENT

Before they began their policy of 'Improvement', involving the eviction or clearance of people from their ancestral homes, Sutherland Estates carried out a detailed survey of all their possessions, including Achanlochy, where the land was professionally mapped and all details noted before its transformation to sheep country.

**400m (¼ mile) along an inclined track & across rough grazing**



#### 14. BETTYHILL SALMON NET FISHING STATION, CANNING FACTORY & ICE HOUSE

The rich salmon fishery of the River Naver has been exploited on this site for hundreds of years. A sweep net fishing station operated here until recently and, at various times over the last two centuries, an icehouse and a canning factory have been used to preserve fish for sale in distant markets.

#### 15. BETTYHILL WAR MEMORIAL

Throughout history Highlanders have risen to the call to serve their country in times of war. The price of this can be seen on war memorials throughout the Highlands, including Bettyhill War Memorial, and Strathnaver War Memorial at Syre.

**Hill top memorial accessed by steep path**

#### 16. FARR CHURCH (STRATHNAVER MUSEUM) & FARR STONE

St. Columba's Church, now Strathnaver Museum, was built in 1774 on the site of a previous church dating to at least 1223. The Christian heritage of Clachan goes back well before that, as can be seen from the Farr Stone, an 8th Century Christianised Pictish stone just to the West of the present church.



**Roadside information plinths, at wheelchair height, and parking facilities are available near each site.**



**Walking boots recommended**



**Sensible footwear recommended**

Access to sites has been arranged with the kind permission of the owners and tenants of Syre & North Loch Naver Estates, Forest Enterprise, Scottish Executive, The Skelpick Partnership and the River Naver Fisheries Board. NO DOGS can be allowed on common grazing areas and NO CAMPING PLEASE. Enjoy your visit, kindly respect this working landscape and please observe the country code.

This map is available in English, Gaelic, French, German and Italian. The official guidebook 'Strathnaver Trail – The Story of a North Highland Landscape' is also available.