

P25 Achlochan Coastal Heritage



Project Overview:

The natural shelters of the Achlochan peninsula, its coastal location, the presence of inland fresh-water and readily available construction materials have sustained settlers since the Iron Age. Geologists believe the reed bed – the largest in Wester Ross, and a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) – was once a sea loch and in more recent times sheltered boats.

The peninsula's historic broch ruin is one of the few in North-West Scotland and the nearby World War One rifle range and drill hall are similarly rare. Remains of 19th century kelp kilns and boat nausts (or shelters) point to the 19th century. The geological SSSI is of national importance as rocks of two different ages lie adjacent to one another.

The aims of the project are to:

- Safeguard and restore the peninsula's natural, built and cultural heritage with managed and responsible access.
- Provide improved access for visitors and locals to heritage features and more information about them to help the public interpret and explore these heritage assets.
- Undertake the first comprehensive archaeological survey of the broch and other structures on the peninsula before undertaking essential repairs to the surrounding buildings and consolidating the firing range.
- Reclaim an area of open water on Loch Poll an Dunan.

Project lead organisation and other organisations involved: Scottish Wildlife Trust, CALLP, local crofters and NatureScot

Project Location: Achlochan, Coigach

Project dates: 2016- August 2021

Project Outputs

Measure	Target	Delivered	Notes
An area (to be determined in conjunction with SNH) of open water returned to the lochan	1	1	Delivered in partnership with NatureScot (Annex 2).
Broch recorded and surveyed	1	1	Broch recording completed with survey report and conservation management recommendations. Interpretation panel installed (Annex 5).
Buildings surrounding the broch made stable and consolidated	5	5	Owl barn has also been consolidated. Access to the older ruins now restricted.

World War One Firing Range stances and target consolidated and interpreted	2	2	2 interpretation panels installed and seating area (Annex 1 and Annex 4)
Access path constructed	1 km	1	Delivered and increased number of walkers (Annex 3)
Access path repaired	0.4 km	0.4	Path drainage also improved
Peninsula path waymarked and people counter installed	1.6 km	1.6	14 waymarkers installed. New people counter data shows a typical monthly footfall of 500 and has been up to 1000. Some days over 100 people (Annex 3).
Bird watching point constructed	1	1	
1 conservation management plan	1	1	
Volunteer Days	30	122.7	

Scheme Outputs

How has the project contributed to the CALLP Scheme Outcomes:

Y	1. The key features of the Coigach and Assynt Landscape will better understood and restored with a fit for purpose system in place to ensure the benefits are sustained. <i>Achlochan coastal walk is enjoyed by local people and visitors and interpretation provides information on the archaeology, natural and social history of the area.</i>
Y	2. Where appropriate the connectivity and diversity of selected habitats will be mapped. <i>Broch recording completed with survey report and conservation management recommendations.</i>
Y	3. Increased awareness and understanding amongst all individuals and groups of what makes Coigach and Assynt special and the threats to the unique heritage. <i>Interpretation and engagement through volunteer days has increased awareness and understanding amongst all individuals of what makes this area special. Oral history, archive and bird watching training has also been valuable.</i>
Y	4. Important elements of the built, cultural and natural heritage will be recorded, improved, made publicly accessible and celebrated by the local community. <i>Important elements of the built, cultural and natural heritage are recorded and presented on the interpretation panels for all people to view and celebrate. Research material donated to local heritage archive.</i>
Y	5. People will have gained new skills in researching, restoring and understanding their heritage. <i>The interpretation panels provide important and interesting information about the area's archaeology, natural and social history. Volunteers have assisted with the key work to improve and maintain the owl barn and firing range, installation of path infrastructure</i>

	<i>management of key habitats building new skills and making a key contribution to the upkeep of the area.</i>
Y	6. Collected data, information and interpretation will be more accessible in the public domain including posting on appropriate websites. <i>Interpretation is accessible along the coastal footpath. A people counter has been installed along the Postie's path to monitor use and footfall.</i>
Y	7. Local groups and individuals understand, enjoy, value and take action in the Coigach and Assynt area in ways they did not at the outset. <i>The interpretation and path waymarking supports local groups and individuals to enjoy and value the local area. Continued volunteer days provide opportunities for people to take action to look after and be stewards for this important area.</i>
Y	8. Increased access infrastructure at key strategic locations enabling people to enjoy the natural and cultural heritage of the area. <i>Waymarking the coastal path facilitates proper access for people to and enjoy the natural and cultural heritage of Achlochan; also path improvements.</i>
Y	9. Increased opportunities for informal recreation that promotes health and well-being benefits. <i>The improvements provide increased recreational opportunities which promote good health and well-being.</i>

Reflecting on the last 5 years, what's the one thing that you're most proud of that has come from your project being part of CALLP?

We did It!

The Achlochan project has turned out to be much larger than any of us expected and it has been delivered within time and budget. We are very pleased with the results - the restoration of built and natural heritage together with the knowledge gained about social history. There is now much greater awareness of Achlochan and its riches in the local community and among visitors. Bringing the different project teams together across the region has been hugely valuable and hopefully there will be support to continue this sharing of knowledge and experience, networking and community development. The whole has certainly been greater than the sum of the parts. As the Scheme comes to an end there is an unexpected sense of loss for the communities.

What difference has this project made to the built, cultural and natural heritage of Coigach and Assynt?

It has made a huge difference. Many more people are walking the peninsula and have access to information about the geology, wildlife, archaeology and social history. People have learned more about conservation and continue to maintain and protect the loch, the land and the wildlife. As listed above, paths have been created, restored and waymarked, an archaeological survey completed, open water restored at Loch Poll an Dunain to diversify habitats and the WW1 rifle range secured and understood.

What difference has this project made to People?

People have learned a great deal about Achlochan peninsula and consequently the local area - its archaeology, natural and social history. At different stages of the project volunteers have included local residents, visitors and descendants of the families who once lived there. We now know more about one another's skills and experience eg the local crofter who is a keen bird watcher and whose knowledge and input has been valuable. Much stronger relationships with team from SWT, NatureScot, also with other project partners in the Scheme and of course the excellent CALLP team has made a big difference.

"Amazing to learn people have been living here for over 4k years" Local crofter

"we learnt so much today" Young teenager who helped with archaeological survey

"Wonderful to see the ducks back on the clear water at the loch after all these years"
Local volunteer

"very moving to learn about the wartime losses and the impact on the community"
Volunteer

Useful Links

<https://coigach-assynt.org/2019/02/volunteer-training-at-achlochan/>

<https://coigach-assynt.org/2016/11/achlochan-coastal-heritage-project/>

Future Plans and Legacy

Detailed future management plan in place; if resources permit we want to showcase the material gathered in local heritage centre; research material is being donated to the local Coigach heritage group and the summary of the Achlochan story will be on the local website and elsewhere.

LESSONS LEARNED

What are the three positive lessons gained from the scheme:

1. Importance of developing partnerships from the outset eg Local crofters, CALLP, SWT, NatureScot all working together
2. Local community involvement and support - including generous fundraising
3. Value of involving the local schools where possible

What are the three negative lessons gained from the scheme:

1. Be prepared for the unexpected eg as skilled craftsmen/women in great demand delays inevitable
2. These projects take much longer than expected
3. Small local population so difficult to recruit sufficient volunteers and pressure on those who do commit

Funding Partners



The Pilgrim Trust



Photographic Evidence



Firing range with interpretation and people counter ©Michelle Henley



Interpretation panel ©Michelle Henley



Volunteers carrying out habitat management work © Mark Foxwell



Walkers on the Achlochan Coastal Footpath © Michelle Henley

Annex 1: Crofting Landscape Panel

Crofting Landscape

Achiltibuie is one of the best examples of a traditional linear crofting landscape. It was once intensively cultivated, heavily populated and Gaelic speaking. So what happened and why?

A land shaped by history

Land tenure in the 18th and 19th centuries was complex and insecure. When the landlord decided sheep were more profitable than people, many families were forced from farm settlements to newly created and often infertile crofts along the coast. These 'Clearances' took place across the Highlands and Islands.

'Is treasa tuath na tighearna'

'The people are mightier than a lord'

Land and people had become a commodity and the injustice of the clearances was deeply felt. When the sheriff's officers tried to serve eviction notices in the 1850s local women led the resistance. These Coigach protests resulted in a rare victory for the people over a powerful landlord. As action grew the Highland Land League was formed. This led to the Crofters Holdings (Scotland) Act in 1886, which guaranteed longer leases, fair rents and security of tenure.

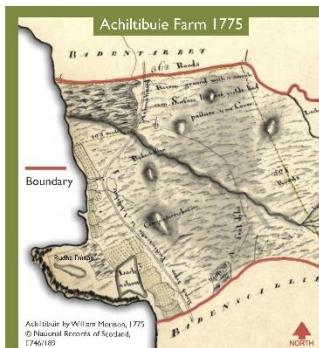
The Highland exodus

Crofting life was hard – the land was cultivated by hand and the sea claimed many lives. People often had to travel long distances for seasonal work to pay their rents and there was widespread poverty. Many felt they had little choice but to leave particularly when assisted emigration to North America, Australia and New Zealand was introduced.

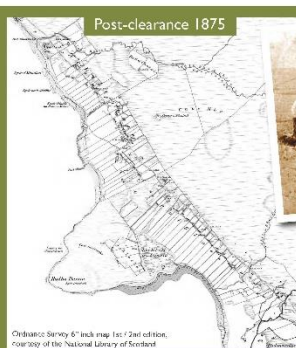
GAELIC DICTIONARY

Achd-ille-buidhe –
Achd-ille-buidhe,
field of the fair haired boy
A'choigeach –
Coigach, place of fifths

Bùntata – potatoes
Caoraich – sheep
Coirce – oats
Feur – hay
Snèapan – turnip



The Clearances moved people from clustered farming settlements and seasonal sheilings (often inland) to densely packed crofts along the coast.



Crofting Life

The main crops were hay, oats, turnips and potatoes. Crofters also kept stock and fishing supplemented livelihoods. They had a share in the common grazings, used peat for fuel and seaweed as fertiliser.

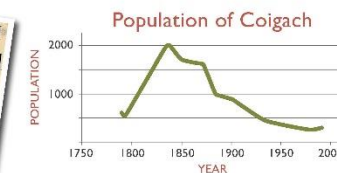


Most crofts were cultivated until the mid-20th century when migration escalated. Crofting alone could no longer sustain families.

'Mo shoraidh leis a' Choigiech
's le Beinn Mhòr a' cheò,
Meall Dubh 'is Spicean Coitich
far an robh mi aotrom òg'

My farewell to Coigach
and Beinn Mhòr of the mist
Meall Dubh and Spicean
Coitich where I was young
and carefree

From the song written in Montana
c.1910, by Murdoch Maclean, Altondu



Nowadays crofting is almost always combined with other work. But there is renewed interest in the environment and working the land.



This project is a partnership led by local crofters and the community. We are grateful to all donors and supporters for helping to safeguard Achlochan heritage.

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Annex 2: Natural Achlochan Panel

Natural Achlochan

The rich natural resources of this peninsula have supported people for over 4000 years. The reeds were used for thatching, the sandstone quarried for the buildings and the land cultivated.

An ancient landscape
Rudha Dùnan is made of sandstones deposited billions of years ago. The ancient sedimentary rock, Torridonian sandstone, rests on even older rock, Lewisian gneiss, which was formed deep in the earth's crust. Glaciers scoured away much of the younger rock, creating the landscape you see today.

The sea – highway and larder of the west
For centuries the sea was a lifeline as roads came late to the west coast. Early settlers landed by boat and fishing provided a livelihood. Small shops serving the coastal townships had their provisions delivered by sea, and coal puffers from the Clyde visited regularly. Today the Wester Ross Marine Protected Area protects marine life and promotes sustainable fishing practices.

Loch Poll an Dùnain
6000-9000 years ago storms created the shingle bar, cutting off the sea and forming the freshwater loch. It supports rich marsh and 'fen' habitats dominated by the largest common reed bed *Phragmites australis* in Wester Ross. Birds include reed bunting, sedge warbler and the rarer corncrake and water rail. The loch is also home to diverse flora, insects and animals including dragonflies, eels, water voles and red deer.

Today, the reed is cut to mimic traditional loch management and keep a diverse mosaic of open water, swamp and marsh to benefit and encourage wildlife.

loch area
open water

Ragged robin, yellow iris and early marsh orchid bloom in the marshy grassland.

Gaelic Dictionary

Achadh an lochain – Achlochan, the field/place of the loch	Guilbneach – curlew
Blast-dhubh – otter, the black beast	Lili uisge – water lily
Gille-brìde – oystercatcher	Ròn – seal
	Rudha Dùnan – the headland of the dun or fort

Ground nesting birds
Curlew, snipe, skylark, oystercatcher and meadow pipit nest here and their eggs and chicks are vulnerable.

PLEASE KEEP YOUR DOG ON A LEAD – especially during the lambing and the bird breeding season from April to September.

'the long bright summer nights lying awake in bed listening to the curlews calling'
A childhood memory of Achlochan in the 1930s
© Dabac Maclean

Common Seal © Steve Gardner
Ragged Robin © M. Powell
Water Lily © Neil Wynn
Sedge Warbler © Steve Gardner
Oystercatcher © Steve Gardner



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Coigach & Assynt
LIVING LANDSCAPE

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Annex 3: Achlochan Orientation Panel

Achlochan Coastal Walk

Achadh an Lochain Cuairt Cladaich

Enjoy your walk and please help us protect our coastal heritage.

Crofting land and livestock
You are walking over croft land where sheep and sometimes cattle graze. Sheep have been injured and killed by dogs along this route, so please keep dogs on a lead at all times.

Archaeology
There are fascinating archaeological remains at the Broch and all along the shoreline. The stones hold many secrets, please take care not to move them.

Wildlife
This is an important area for ground nesting birds between April and September. Please keep dogs on a lead to avoid disturbing their nests, eggs and chicks.

Geology
The rocks on this peninsula are billions of years old. The Coigach Geotrail leaflet explains how they were formed and helps you discover the treasures of this landscape.

- Rifle Range path
- Broch path
- Headland rough path
- SSSI boundary

The waymarked route around the headland includes wet boggy areas and rocky ground. There are also steep cliff edges so please keep to the path and follow waymarkers.

Distance: 2.4 miles / 3.8 km (whole path including road)

Time: 1 hr approximately

Please keep your dog on a lead

Please leave gates as you find them

KNOW THE CODE BEFORE YOU GO

Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI's) are areas designated for nature conservation (flora, fauna, geology or landform).

TAKE CARE
 The old stone walls around the broch are unstable and may be dangerous

The stones along the shoreline hold archaeological secrets. Please don't move them.

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Annex 4: Achlochan Rifle Range Panel

Rifle Range and Drill Hall

The structure around you is one of the few surviving WWI rifle ranges built alongside a military drill hall. So what is it doing here and who used it?

The community raised funds to buy the drill hall in 1959 and for many years it served as the village hall.

Rifle Range

A very distant war

Before the Great War, volunteering for the Territorial Army (TA) was popular, offering shooting practice, camps and social events. As war approached the mood changed and the drill hall and rifle range were built in 1914 as part of the national effort to train local forces.

Highland Regiments in the front line

When the call to war came, Lochbroom volunteers were among the first troops to cross to France. They had enlisted mainly with the 4th Seaforth Highlanders and the Lovat Scouts and were highly regarded for their marksmanship and scouting skills.

Almost half of the Highland men who went to war would never return. This left a deep mark on local communities. At the outset of WWII the Coigach men were sent to France with the 51st Highland Division. The 51st was left at St Valery after the Dunkirk evacuations in June 1940. Many lost their lives or were taken prisoner.

The home front

The Highlands were designated a Special Military Area during both wars. In the 1940s the local Home Guard operated look-out points for ships and planes. An observation post on the hill above Polbain helped guard convoys on the Minch.

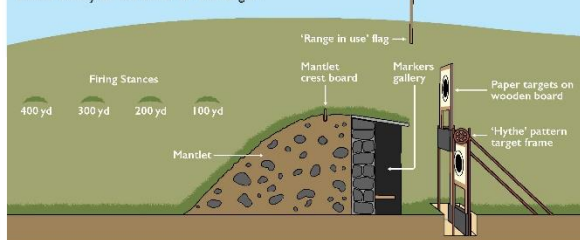
Although some men remained at home as essential agricultural workers, the crofts were worked mainly by women and children.

Social change

The wars changed this close-knit village. Many returning servicemen moved away due to a shortage of land for crofting and the promise of better opportunities elsewhere.

ACHLOCHAN RIFLE RANGE

Standard British forces single target rifle range, known locally as 'the butts' or 'the target'.



The mechanism behind you was used to raise the target up and above the markers gallery into sight of the shooters positioned at four firing stances at up to 400 yards away. Posts mark the old firing stances.



A postcard home from TA training camp. © Ullapool Museum Trust

Seaforth Highlanders at camp, 1914 © Ullapool Museum Trust

Most young men enlisted with the TA and served with the Seaforth Highlanders (*Mackenzie tartan, right*) and Lovat Scouts (*Hunting Fraser tartan, far right*).



'Sgaoil ar sonas uainn air ball
Mar roinneas gaoth nan fuar-bheann ceò.
Bruaillean cogaidh anns an tìr'.

*Our happiness vanished as quickly
As the mountain wind disperses the mist.
The call to war is heard throughout the land.*

From the love song *Sine bhàn* (Fair Jean)
written at the outbreak of WWI



Dingwall, 1914 © Ullapool Museum Trust

Seaforth Highlanders leaving Dingwall for the Front. 90 men from the Coigach area served in WWI.



Queen Alexandra's Royal Nursing Corps, 1940s © Hugh Macdonald



Nurse Lizzie from D'Macdonald OCH who died in 1944

The wars changed the community as women took on new roles and many families lost sons.

Gaelic was the everyday language for most people here until the 1950s when continuing social change and migration brought about its decline. A rich cultural heritage lives on in placenames and through young local musicians.



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Annex 5: Story of the Stones Achlochan Panel

Stories in the Stones

People have lived here for thousands of years, from ancient settlers who built turf round houses to crofting families for whom it was home until the 1950s. The clues are all around you, so be careful where you step!

The Broch – a technical wonder of its age

'The 'Dùn', as it was called locally, was built over 2,000 years ago. Brochs could be built by 30-40 skilled stone-masons in around 4 months. They were then the tallest buildings in Britain, positioned to look impressive, near the sea and good agricultural land. Brochs were among the finest construction achievements of Iron Age Europe. Some were later inhabited by the Picts and Vikings. In the 19th century families used stone from this broch to build the croft houses.

Industrial heritage

All along the shoreline are the shallow remains of kelp kilns, boat shelters, fishermen's huts and much older pre-historic structures. The kelp seaweed industry and herring fishing provided much needed income in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The collapse of these industries led to severe poverty and emigration.

A once vibrant community

Imagine life in Achlochan with the sounds of ploughing and harvesting, livestock, the boat builder's yard, fishermen hauling up catches at the slipways, children walking to school, everyday family life and Gaelic conversation. Now all is quiet except for birdsong and the rustling of wind in the reeds.

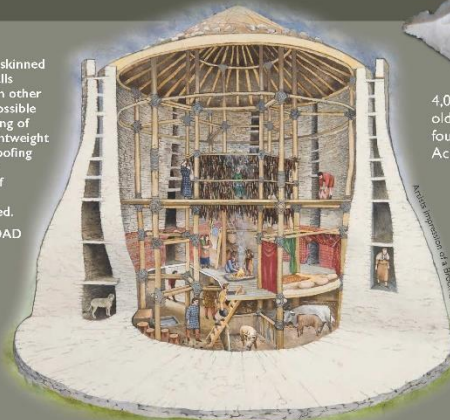
GAELIC DICTIONARY

Bara-bàta – boat noust or stance
Cealp – kelp seaweed
Clachair – stone mason
Cuile – reeds
Dùn – fort
Iasgairean – fishermen

Moine – turf or peat
Port (pronounced porst) – a slipway or jetty
Taigh – house
Tughadh – thatching
Sgoil – school
Sgadan – herring

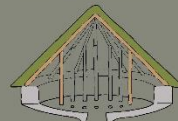
BROCH

The double-skinned drystone walls support each other and make possible a high building of relatively lightweight form. The roofing and interior structures of brochs are much debated. 500BC – 200AD

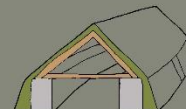


4,000 year old flint tool found near Achlochan.

Through the centuries houses evolved using different materials and construction methods. The first settlers in this area lived in roundhouses with thick stone walls and thatched roofs. The remains of over 45 have been found in the Achiltibuie area.



ROUNDHOUSE
Stone walls and earth fastened stakes
2000BC – 800AD



OLD HIGHLAND COTTAGE OR 'BLACK HOUSE'
Turf or thatch capped stone
Evolved from 800AD – 19th



TRADITIONAL CROFT HOUSE
Lime bonded rubble walls
Early 1800s onwards

Artist's impression of the broch. The remains of the tower are still contained within a rubble cone which preserves the ground floor.



© SOCA Archaeology 2016

Salted and smoked herring was briefly a thriving business (1773-1820s) with curing stations at Tanera Mòr, Isle Martin and Ullapool.



Painted 1821 by William Ormerod



Achlochan and Horne Island, c.1925



c.1941 © National Museum

Abandoned houses quickly turn to ruin and memories fade. Alexander Stewart (above) was the last resident of the house by the broch.



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