

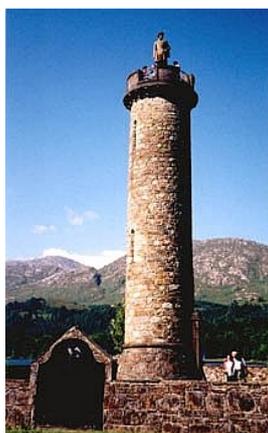
Chapter 37
1957 – 1958
Bannockburn / Portree (i) – June 1957

Having recovered sufficiently from my ankle ligament injury, I managed, at the end of June, 1957, to undertake a ‘hitch-hiking-camping-youth hostelling’ expedition with Jim Watson to Fort William, Loch Sheil, Mallaig, Portree on the Isle of Skye, Loch Duich, Loch Ness and Inverness. The motivation for this project was not primarily additional therapy for my weakened ankle, rather it was to make a surprise call on our ‘mentor’, Mr George Sinclair, by then Headteacher at Portree High School. Thus, suitably kitted-out, we, and our heavily laden rucksacks, caught a 6 a.m. train from Stirling that was bound for Oban. After an unforgettable journey in the early morning light – particularly when chugging up the western edge of Loch Lubnaig – we, as planned, alighted at Tyndrum to try our luck at getting lifts northwards through Glencoe and even beyond.

We had barely walked half a mile up the steep entrance to the glen when we were picked up by a lorry-driver bound for Fort William, and, as his vehicle was too heavy for the ferry at Lochleven, we, after marvelling at the barren wastes and towering mountains of the lonely glen, had the added enjoyment of a sylvan but lengthy and tortuous road detour via Kinlochleven at the head of the loch. After lunch in Fort William, we hiked west on the road to Glenfinnan on Loch Sheil where Bonnie Prince Charlie's fight for the British throne had gathered momentum in August 1745 as he raised the Jacobite standard and rallied over one thousand of his Highland clansmen for battle.



The Glenfinnan Monument was built around 1815 by Mr Alexander MacDonald of Glenaladale to commemorate the clansmen who had fought for the cause.

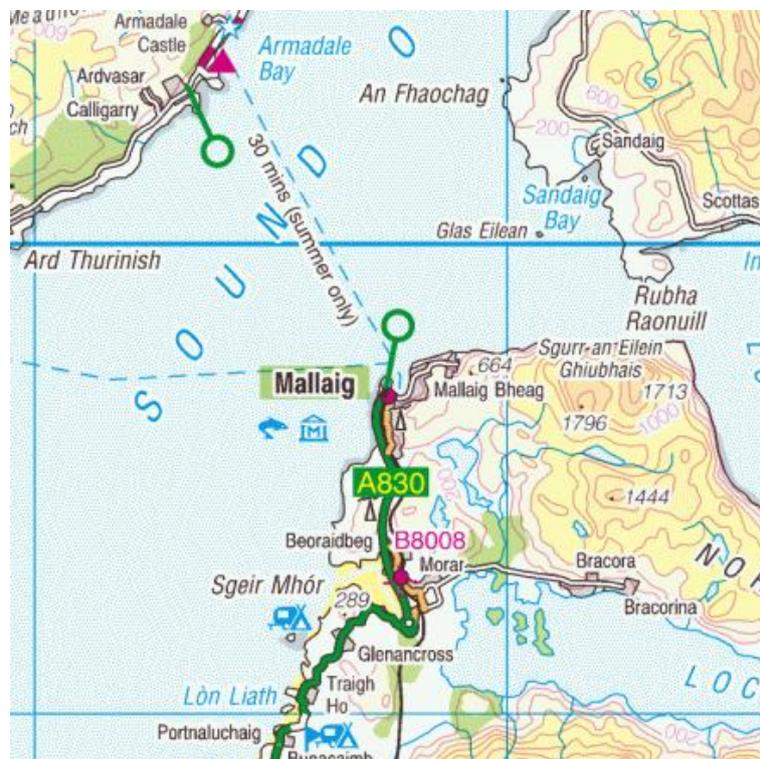


Our luck was in again, when, soon after leaving the monument, a travelling salesman took pity on us, a perspiring pair of hikers. So, as we admired the scenery, he drove us all the way to the little port of Mallaig where we camped for the night at almost the same spot in Mallaig Bhaig from where this next (but more recent) photograph has been taken.



Although on a slope, it was otherwise an idyllic campsite. In my mind's eye I recall, sitting at our small camp-fire in the serene gloaming, gazing out to sea at the incomparable view, and listening to a silence that was only occasionally disturbed by either the splash of oars or the putt-putt of a fishing boat engine taking a local crew out to sea for their night's work.

Next morning we boarded the ferry that was to take us 'over the sea to Skye' to dock at Armadale on a south-eastern extremity of the island. The weather for the trip was still glorious and the crossing uneventful.



On reaching Armadale Bay, we noticed that the tide was well out, and, that not only did the beach look magnificent, but that the calm sea would probably offer an ideal cooling-off, if not, more likely, a chilling awakening. Picnic lunch on the beach after our dip was agreed ... until ... but I'll let my wee poem tell what happened

*We lurched off the ferry from Mallaig,
Our land-legs and rucksacks all tilted,
But struck out for sea-side attractions,
And a dip ere the warm sun had wilted.*

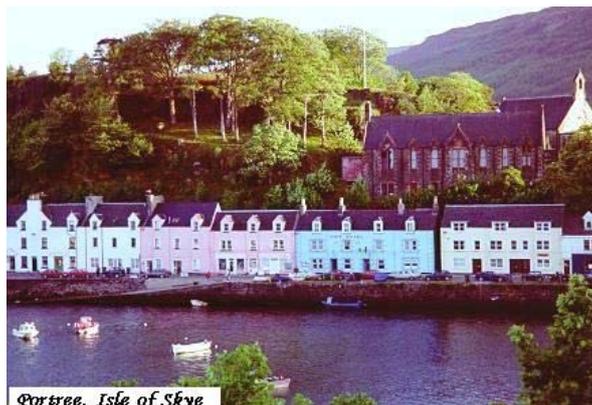
*First sight of the bay was quite appealing,
Though more sand than water in reach,
And scattered all over its surface,
Huge 'dishes' just littered the beach.*

*"Baby UFOs from Mars", quipped ma partner.
We'll skirt them and go for our swim."
"No fear, said I, less enchanted,
Let's just take a look closer in."*

*The space-crafts seemed coated in jelly,
Changed shape when washed by the tide,
Not even a paddle was ventured,
Our detour that followed was wide!*

After a hastily re-arranged snack had been enjoyed without a dip to give an edge to our appetites, the sky started to cloud over, and I sensed that at least a drizzle of rain was on the way. So we 'shouldered packs' and got on the road. A Scots' mist soon accompanied our walk on a road, unfortunately for us, devoid of any transport except for the occasional tractor or horse and cart. So, after we had plodded on for about two hours, both of us came to the conclusion that, if we reached Broadford by evening, then we would have done well enough. Portree would have to wait for the morrow.

Then out of the blue (or gray as it was!) a van stopped for us and the driver's destination was Portree! Yippee! We got to Portree in time for tea! But not before we had climbed up to the old high school on the hillside overlooking a peaceful wooded valley and the town. There we had a pleasant re-union with a much surprised but delighted Mr Sinclair And although, as ever, he gave little hint of emotion, we were fairly certain that he indeed felt flattered that we had come such a long way to visit him ... two almost full grown young men compared to the callow youths he had 'deserted' some three years previously. *[The high school is seen in the top left corner of this photograph]*



The evening turned fine as we replenished our stores from one of the wee shops still to be seen in this picture. Then we headed back into the valley behind the shops to pitch our tent, found a convenient burn, gathered wood, built a good fire and cooked dinner the 'piece de resistance', a little later, being, at least for me (a non-Scout!), jacket-potatoes roasted in the slow-cooling ashes of the dying fire.

We awoke next morning, early as usual, to the sound of rain beating on our canvas shelter. A hasty 'inside-the-tent' breakfast without a hot drink was soon followed by our hurriedly breaking camp, donning our oilskins and setting off at a good pace down the road south. The rain was incessant. We walked all day in it without the hint of a lift, until, a real 'drookit' pair, we gave in just short of Kyleakin and made a soaking wet camp, without permission, in a farmer's field in the lea of a hedge.

The less said about that night the better! But although morale was a bit low, neither complained as we blethered away as usual until one or the other drifted off to sleep. On the other hand, 'the morning bright with rosy light' challenged our patience in quite a different manner. Though excruciatingly bothersome to us, the scenes we enacted on emerging from our dripping, but by then also steaming tent, would have been a sell-out at any theatre pantomime. Why? We were swamped by hordes of flies revelling in the morning sunshine and heat after twenty-four hours of rain. Our speedy retreat into the tent brought the decision to put on (over our pyjamas) every stitch of protective clothing we could find in our rucksacks; then not to just 'break-camp' but rather 'crash-camp' and get the h--- out of there as fast as possible. I swear that we were almost at the ferry before the 'barmy-army' of insects finally deserted us for less mobile targets ... perhaps sweeter, too, as I am sure that by then neither of us would have smelt terribly appetising! The short crossing on the Kyleakin to Kyle of Lochalsh ferry returned us to relative civilization and a relaxing meal in a local pub, plus a couple of beer shandies to celebrate our escape. These latter refreshments we were destined to regret as with the return of high temperatures, and no sign of a lift until mid-afternoon, we sweated like pigs as we slogged along, heavy-laden as ever, up and down the road to Eilean Donan Castle, near Dornie on Loch Duich.



Our secondary target was to spend the night at Ratagan Youth Hostel at Sheil Bridge near the foot of the loch ... and, among other things, do a right good washing of both ourselves and our clothes! How we got there is another story!