

Because some of the materials used in the original construction were inadequate, major repairs to the canal had to be carried out between 1843-47 at a cost of £136,000. Commercially the canal was not a success but it soon became a tourist attraction, especially when Queen Victoria sailed up its length in 1873. There were soon regular steamboat services between Glasgow and Inverness.

The canal saw one of its busiest times during the First World War when it was used by the navy and other vessels to, once again, avoid enemy action around the coast. There was also an American naval base at Muirtown. The Second World War saw the canal being used again as part of the war effort.

In the 1960s the locks were mechanised at a cost of £200,000, thus cutting journey times. Today the canal is a much used leisure resource, not just for getting from one side of Scotland to the other, but also for water based activities and for walking and cycling along its banks. We'll leave the last word to Telford who described his canal as "one of the most magnificent and splendid of our national structures"<sup>5</sup>.



5. Highland Waterway: The Caledonian Canal by Francis Thompson 1972.

# CALEDONIAN CANAL

## 200th ANNIVERSARY

To celebrate the opening of the canal on the 23rd October 1822, Inverness Library will have an exhibition on the canal in the main library and another on its builder, Thomas Telford, in the Reference Library.

See also the amazing Lego model of the canal in the Reference Library. (Unlike the actual canal (which took nearly 20 years to construct) this one only took 6 weeks to build during the summer holidays).

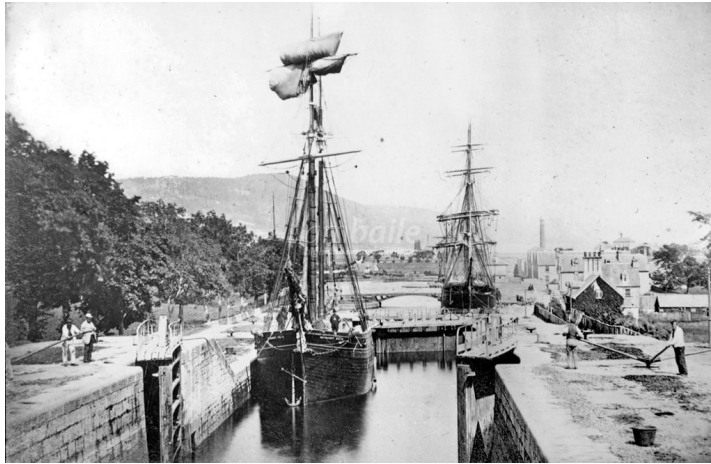
An Inverness Library Production.

The idea of a navigable waterway between east and west Scotland, using the natural fault-line of the Great Glen, had been around for a number of years. One of the prophecies of the Brahan Seer in the 17th Century was that "full-rigged ships will be seen sailing eastward and westward by the back of Tomnahurich, near Inverness"<sup>1</sup>. With its 4 lochs (Lochy, Oich, Ness & Dochfour) covering two thirds of the 60 miles between Corpach, near Fort William, in the west and Inverness in the east the Glen lent itself to plans for a canal, thus avoiding the perilous sea route around the north of Scotland.

1. Highland Waterway: The Caledonian Canal by Francis Thompson 1972. 386.47

Plans were made in 1726, 1773, 1785 and 1793. In the end it was the mass emigration from this part of Scotland that finally brought action. Thomas Telford, the foremost engineer of the time, was asked to recommend solutions to stop the drain of people, for as he reported “about three thousand persons had left our shores in the previous year, and he was informed that three times that number were preparing to leave in the course of the year in which he was writing”<sup>2</sup> (1802). He proposed improvements to the infrastructure—roads, bridges, harbours and the canal, which would provide employment and boost the economy.

Another consideration at this time was the war with France and the fear of privateers attacking vessels around the coast of Scotland. Acts of Parliament were passed in 1803/4 and money granted to fund the building of the canal. It was expected to take 7 years and cost £474,000. Work was started in 1804 at each end where workshops and accommodation were built.



The 'Margaret Reid' ship on the Caledonian Canal, Muirtown—1884

Labour was an issue as local people were not accustomed to this type of work and would disappear at harvest time or during the fishing season. There were also other

problems with the workforce and cows were provided for “milk to wean the men from the pernicious habit of drinking whisky”<sup>3</sup>.

Clachnaharry Lock was the first of the 29 locks to be completed in 1807 and the Muirtown Basin was constructed the same year. The Muirtown locks were finished in 1809 and 3 of the 8 locks at Corpach. The sea lock at Clachnaharry was more of a challenge as they had to extend the canal out into the Beaully Firth to get to deeper water but the mud here was 56 feet deep. They built a peninsula 400yds long and then dug the canal into this.

The highest point of the canal is at Laggan, between Loch Oich and Loch Lochy, at 106ft above sea level. A deep cutting was required between these 2 lochs and Loch Lochy was raised 12ft to reduce the level of the cutting. Lochs Oich and Dochfour had to be dredged and rivers Lochy and Oich were diverted. Labour and material costs rose so that by the time the canal opened in 1822 the final bill was over £900,000.

There had been much criticism of the need for such an enterprise in this location and by the time the canal was finished many of the reasons for its construction had disappeared. There was peace with France and many modern ships were now too large for the canal. Telford, however, commented on “the change which had been produced even in the last ten or twelve years upon the intelligence and the manners of the inhabitants”<sup>4</sup>.

3. Highland Waterway: The Caledonian Canal by Francis Thompson
4. Highland Waterway: The Caledonian Canal by Francis Thompson