

A Walk Through Lochranza's History

This is an easy walk that starts at Lochranza's pier and finishes at the Arran Distillery. Allow approximately half an hour to walk it. It consists mostly of flat road walking except for the Lochranza Golf Course section which is mown grass. The features of the landscape that you see as you walk tell the story of Lochranza's past. Grid references are included to help you to locate the position of particular features. Both the Ordnance Survey and Harveys produce 1:25 000 scale maps of Arran. Walking instructions are in bold type.

The Village of Lochranza

Until the Boguille Road was built in 1843, travelling to Lochranza from other parts of the island was difficult. In contrast, Lochranza has always been well-connected by sea due to its sheltered inner harbour and its strategic position on the Kilbrannan Sound. The landscape of scattered white cottages that you see today belongs to the 19th Century when villagers made a living from crofting and herring fishing. For more than a thousand years before then, Gaelic-speaking families lived and worked communally on the rough mountainous land. The Gaelic place names which you can find on your map are their legacy.

Start at the pier (GR: 926 510)

Lochranza's first pier was built in the 1880s. Before this time, boats would land on the shore or people would be rowed to shore if boats were of significant size.

Follow the road south-east through the village with the loch on your left

Notice the large villas on your right which include Kincardine Lodge and Ben Varen, built in the early 20th century. If you are wondering who were the people that could afford to build such substantial elegant properties, the answer is that it was often local men who made their fortunes at sea and built them as retirement homes.

As you pass Lochranza Hotel on your right, look up

The Iron Age Hill Fort (GR: 928 504)

The flat-topped hill you see above you is an Iron Age Hill Fort, probably built in the first millennium B.C. Although no one knows for certain what such hill forts were used for, it was clearly intended to make a visual statement and it is the first physical evidence of human occupation in the Lochranza area. Its situation offers views over the Kilbrannan Sound and Loch Fyne. There is a short gorge bordering it to the west and a long crescent-shaped wall to the south. It can be reached via Coillemore.



Lochranza's Iron Age Hill Fort. Its most recent invader is the rhododendron ponticum which can be seen in the photograph encroaching on the ruined wall. Where this plant takes hold, it destroys all other vegetation.

Walk across the spit of land to Lochranza Castle (GR: 934 506) Here you can find Historic Scotland interpretation panels which explain the castle's history

This is also a good vantage point for seeing features in the landscape of Lochranza which reveal the past. You will notice that most of the village houses lie along the south shore of the loch, which is the side on which you are walking. For two months each winter some of these homes receive no direct sunlight. They were built in the 19th century as fishing crofts, close to the inner harbour. In addition their situation offers shelter from the prevailing south-westerly winds.

The village of Lochranza did not exist until the 19th century although people lived in small settlements or clachans in the area. The name Lochranza simply referred to the loch. It is Old Norse- the language of the Vikings. Another local Norse name is Glen Chalmadale (**GR: 950 500**) which derives from Hjalmund's Dale. This suggests that Hjalmund , a Viking, conquered the area and become a landlord.

Viking raids began in south-west Scotland around AD 797. Before then, Arran was populated by Gaelic-speaking people from the sea kingdom of Dal Riata which encompassed Northern Ireland and West Scotland. The distinctive

culture and ways of life that came to Arran with them in the sixth century continued with very little change for more than a thousand years.

The clachans or communal farms consisted of four or five single storey blackhouses with a good water supply nearby. Such settlements in the Lochranza area included Coillemore (**GR: 924 508**), Narachan (**GR: 947 502**), Urinbeg (**GR: 927 507**) and Margnaeglish (**GR: 938 500**). The clachans were situated in fertile pockets of land above the level of the present-day village. The people grew oats, barley, peas and beans, and kept small black cows and native sheep. They shared their labour and their implements in a rotation system of tending the land known as runrig.

Robert McLellan, the 20th century writer who lived at High Corrie, said “They were left to live in their own ancient way as long as they paid rent and suffered the onslaughts of their landlord’s enemies.”

These people led outdoor lives and had a deep familiarity with the land they lived on. They named almost every feature in terms of the resources it offered or its significance. Some examples include:

Boguille (**GR: 973 483**) A boggy place, useful for supplying peat for fuel
Allt an Uisge (**GR: 927 508**) A freshwater burn, useful for washing (as opposed to saltwater)

Creag a’ chaise (**G.R. 942 493**) Cheese crag. You can find this crag high above Gleann Easan Biorach where sheilings (huts) were situated for tending the cattle which grazed the high pastures in summer.



Creag a’chaise overlooking Margnaeglish, Lochranza village and the castle

Lochranza Castle was built in turbulent, violent timesThe castle was built as a stronghold and that strength has been tested by eight centuries of powerful winter storms blasting down the glen. The 13th century was a time of tension between Scotland and Norway as they disputed control of Argyll and the Isles. The tension came to a climax at the Battle of Largs in 1263 when the Vikings in Scotland were finally defeated.

Lochranza Castle may have been built by Dougall MacSween who built Skipness Castle which is visible from Lochranza across the Kilbrannan Sound in morning sunshine. The two castles would have stood guard against sea raiders at each side of this stretch of water which offers a way in to Loch Fyne and the Clyde. Originally Lochranza Castle was a medieval hall house, which was turned into a tower house in the late 1500s. At the same time it was altered to face the land rather than the sea.



Lochranza Castle from the Iron Age Hill Fort looking across to the houses of Newton Shore

Great change in the late 18th century

In the last quarter of the 18th century, throughout the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, the Gaelic-speaking people whose ancestors had named and worked the land for centuries, were cleared out of the communal runrig farms by their landlords to make way for sheep. This was the time of both agricultural and industrial revolution and it was believed that replacing runrig with individual farms would be more economically productive.

The Clearances left many families deprived of both home and land. Each runrig farm had supported several families but these were divided up into small holdings for single tenants. Those able to afford a tenancy made a living from herring fishing and cultivating their allocation of land. The white cottages of Lochranza date from this period. If you look across the loch at the hillside

above Newton Shore you will see the remains of old dykes and hedges which enclosed the land of individual holdings. They have now fallen into disrepair. The land on the loch shore was rocky and growing crops must have meant ceaseless, back-breaking labour.

The reorganisation left many heads of families without work. Some became agricultural labourers, others drifted to the developing industry of the Central Belt, and some emigrated to Canada. There were attempts at small-scale industry with coal mining near the Cock of Arran and slate quarrying above Glen Farm but these did not prosper. For the elderly and infirm it was a time of great poverty.

Wild mountains come into fashion

When you look inland from Newton Point (**G.R. 932 517**) Lochranza nestles under the jagged mountain ridge (sometimes called the Sleeping Warrior) that rises to Caisteal Abhail (**G.R. 968 442**). Such wild landscapes started to become admired in the late 18th century and were the subject of painters and writers. Previously, wilderness had been perceived as horrifying and threatening. The first tourists started to visit Arran at this time and marvelled at the mountain beauty now cleared of a lot of its human inhabitants.

The beginning of the understanding of geology

A now-famous 18th century visitor to Lochranza was James Hutton who, whilst walking along the coast towards the Cock of Arran, started to formulate theories of geology which were considered radical at the time. Most Europeans then believed that God had created the world. Arran's variety of rocks, formed in different places at different times, made Hutton certain that violent forces over huge passages of time must have shaped the world.

The 19th century village of Lochranza

Gaelic continued to be spoken in Lochranza and the north-west of Arran until the early twentieth century. Although runrig and the culture of the communal clachans was lost, folk tales and songs of fairies, whisky smuggling, summering cattle on the hills and raiders from Kintyre linked villagers to the past.

When the Boguille road was built in 1843 it opened up travel between Lochranza and Sannox. It was 9 feet wide allowing two carts to pass each other. However, there were no bridges which meant that rivers had to be crossed at fords. Crossings must have been treacherous in times of high rainfall when the mountain burns rise rapidly.

A bustling fishing community

Imagine the scene around the Castle in the 19th century and first half of the 20th centuries. Herring fishing brought bustle and trade to Lochranza's shores, but it was a way of life beset by hardship and dangers.

In *The History of the Villages of the Isle of Arran* Neal Clark remembered a hardy breed of herring fishermen and how they "would sail on a Monday

morning, and on the first haul their clothes got wet through, and were still wet when they came ashore on Saturday mornings". Smacks sailed between Kintyre, Arran and the Clyde, delivering heavy goods such as coal, sand and gravel bricks onto the beaches. Paddle steamers competed for the business of tourists from Glasgow sailing "doon the watter" of the Clyde.

For 40 years schoolmaster Mr. MacAlister gave evening classes in navigation to the boys of Lochranza enabling them to find jobs in the Merchant Navy. By the beginning of the 20th century, 29 young men from Lochranza and Catacol had become master mariners. It was these local seafarers who built the villas such as Ben Varen, Kincardine Lodge and the Anchorage as retirement and holiday homes which you passed earlier. Some of the villas have backhouses which accommodated the owners when houses were let to holidaymakers for the summer.

By 1928 the sea's resources were exhausted and Lochranza's fishing industry was extinct.

Leave the castle spit and continue south along the road

At a bend in the road you pass Lochranza and Catacol Village Hall built in 2001 to replace the old Village Hall built in 1920. The next building is Lochranza Youth Hostel which used to be Lochranza's Hotel. Just beyond the head of the loch you will see a ruined cottage set back from the road on the left. This is Lochranza's Barkin' House where, at high tide, fishermen strengthened their nets by soaking them in a solution of tannin-rich bark. On the opposite side of the road, look out for Ladeside Cottages and the Geology Field Studies Centre. Both buildings were originally schools. The building which is now the Field Studies Centre in 1873 replaced the school that had occupied Ladeside Cottages. Until Cock Farm (**G.R. 965 516**) was abandoned in 1912, the children of Arran's north-east coast walked the three miles to school and back daily, except in winter when a teacher stayed with them. In the 19th century children weren't allowed to play games outside on Sundays.

Lochranza Kirk

Lochranza Kirk dates from 1712 when the Good Duchess Anne Hamilton of Brodick Castle provided the money for its building, but some form of church has stood on this site since before the Reformation of 1560. At the time of the Reformation Arran had two parishes, Kilmory and Kilbride (Lamlash). The parish boundary divided Lochranza into two. People on the south shore were in Kilmory parish and on the north shore in Kilbride.

Turn left along Newton Road and walk in the direction of Newton Shore. Turn right into the second gate of the golf course (G.R 939 504). If it's clear you will get a good view of the Sleeping Warrior ridge mentioned earlier. Follow the white posts with purple arrows across the golf course to the Stags Pavilion Restaurant. Give way to golfers please.

The village golf course was opened on 6th June 1899. It had 12 holes and was created on land leased from the Estate. In the Second World War it was used as a camp for commando training and the golf pavilion, now the Stags Pavilion Restaurant, was used by the commandos as a tea hut. In the 1990s the field below Butt Lodge and the sea field were added to the existing golf course. At one time the golf course extended up the hillside towards Narachan. An old tee is still visible above Broombank cottage.

As you walk along the golf course path from Newton Road to the Stags Pavilion Restaurant you can see the remains of an old mill (**G.R.940 504**). On the hillside above the campsite you can see evidence of 19th century quarrying (**G.R.943 503**).



The ruins of the mill beside the 8th green

Blackface sheep introduced after the Clearances still come on to the golf course for tugging in early November and remain there until after lambing in April. The golf course benefits from the close grazing and fertilising by sheep and the sheep benefit from the rich golf course grass.

Turn left out of the car park. The walk finishes at the Arran Distillery.

The Arran Distillery was opened in 1995. Throughout the 19th century a thriving but illegal whisky distilling industry existed on Arran. The Distillery has a cafe and offers daily tours which tell the story of whisky distilling in Lochranza.

Today the Lochranza area is a National Scenic Area and designated wild land used for sheep grazing and deer forest. Current issues of land management include the invasion of the hillsides by the rhododendron ponticum which

reduces biodiversity and which is difficult to eradicate (see the photograph of the Iron Age Hill Fort).

Lochranza's scenic beauty continues to draw tourists whilst its situation in the less inhabited, northern part of the island protects it from crowds. However, the ferry link to Claonaig and facilities for sailors keep open the historic waterways to Kintyre and the Clyde and ensure that the village is not a backwater.

Kathryn Wells 2014

Further reading:

Arran Civic Trust. *Buildings of Arran*.

Campbell, T. *Arran A History*. Birlinn Ltd: Edinburgh.

Clark, N. *History of the Villages of the Isle of Arran*. SWRI Arran Federation.

Farquharson, M. *Isle of Arran Heritage: The Arran High School Project*. Arran Graphics: Brodick.

Fraser, I. *The Place Names of Arran*. The Arran Society of Glasgow.

Holder, G. *The Guide to Mysterious Arran*. Tempus: Chalford.

McLellan, R. *The Isle of Arran*. David and Charles: Newton Abbot.

These books are available from The Book and Card Store, Brodick, The Arran Heritage Museum and Brodick Castle.
