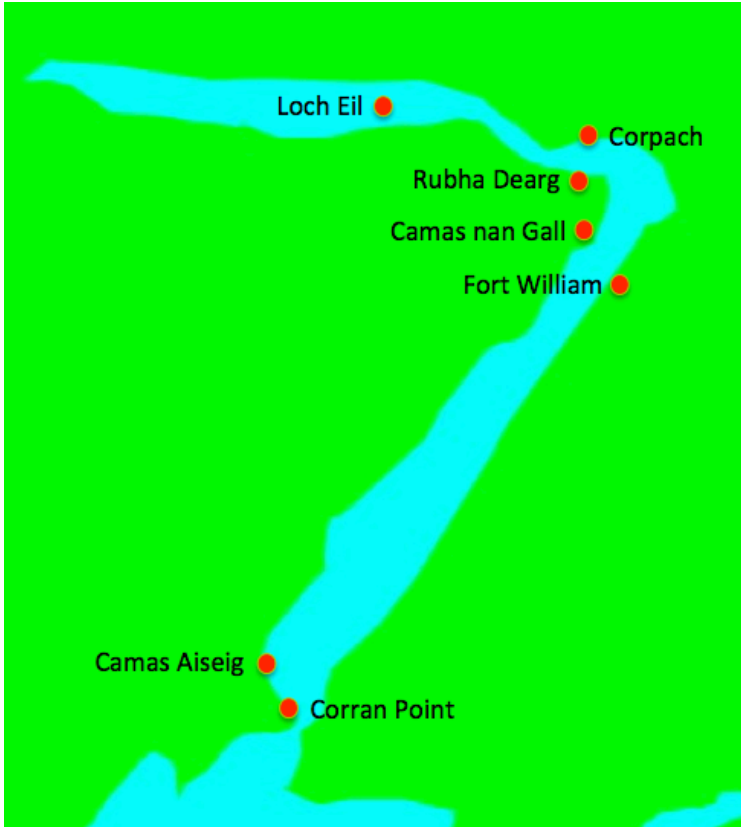


# Upper Loch Linnhe

Last updated January 24<sup>th</sup> 2024



The Corran Narrows is where Lower Loch Linnhe gives way to the upper loch. The ferry across the narrows is still of course very much running (at least when it is not broken-down), providing a much quicker, yet very expensive (free for foot passengers and cyclists) land route to Morvern rather than driving all the way round Loch Eil. It also provides a long route from Oban to Mull via the Loch Aline to Fishnish Ferry, but this does avoid congestion on the Oban to Craignure ferry if you haven't booked.

Because there are not that many interesting anchorages in the loch, I suspect the few boats you do see here are either local or on their way to or from the Caledonian Canal. Indeed, in mid April I have sailed up and down the loch and seen not one other sail.

But it is a grand place with remote mountains to the west and not so remote mountains to the east (along with some main road traffic noise and the suburbs of the not-at-all-pretty Fort William). And 'The Ben' looms at the head of the loch (Ben Nevis to the non-mountaineers). So nothing much has changed in the last 120 years since Frank Cowper wrote: *"I don't think yachtsmen generally, if cruising in a sailing yacht, will care to go up these lochs, unless for some special reason"*.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Frank Cowper, *Sailing Tours: the yachtsman's guide to the cruising waters of the English and adjacent coasts*. Part V. The west coasts of Scotland, the Orkneys and the west coast of the North Sea. Upcott Gill, London. 1896. There is more here than just sailing directions, but little information about what there was ashore, and he did not much describe many human interactions. But his descriptions of sailing with no engine in strong tidal streams are pretty hair raising, particularly bearing in mind he was often single-handed. A lot of the pilotage information could be used today. His obituarist in *Yachting Monthly* wrote in 1930: "From his earliest days Mr. Cowper took cruising to heart and probably did more to popularize this particular way of life than any man of his day. It is almost inconceivable to us now the prejudice which then existed in the public mind against the man who did not employ hands aboard his yacht. But it was through this veteran singlehanded sailor's adventures and writings that the public began to recognize small yacht cruising as a sane man's pastime".

## Camas Aiseig

An awful lot of fish farm stuff in this bay but there is space to anchor. What to see and do is basically the same as at Corran Point (see below) because it is only a short walk away. En route pop into Ardgour Parish Church<sup>2</sup>. This was built in the early 19th century to a design which was partly Telford but mostly it seems by one of his surveyors, William Thomson. It is plain and calm, with a nice wooden ceiling. Once again I found myself wondering who on earth polishes the brass handles at the end of each pew in these remote and tiny churches.

For an al fresco or takeaway beer and food experience try the Ardgour Ales Brewery<sup>3</sup> opened in 2020 on the site of the old manse (ph 01855 632321). It is open every day except Mondays and you buy beer to take away, or sit in the beer tent with fire pits to keep you warm and the midges away. Bar snacks and burgers are available every day, but Friday is pizza night, important to remember that pizza has to be ordered in advance.

## Camas nan Gall and Rubha Dearg

A bit of a tide through Camus nan Gall but this is by far the nicest anchorage in the Fort William area, and certainly the one with the best and most dramatic view of Ben Nevis. Indeed, it was ever thus; back in 1893 R T McMullen described it as "*an exceedingly pretty anchorage*"<sup>4</sup>. The bay just around Rubha Dearg may be more sheltered but instead of the Ben you get a close up view of the remains of the Pulp and Paper Mills which is definitely not a pretty sight (at its peak the pulp mill chomped through 10,000 trees a day, but it only lasted from the 1960s to 1980 when it was closed down, just leaving the paper mill to stagger on until 2005). The walk along the shore between these two anchorages is very pleasant but there is nothing of special interest. Going the other way you soon come to the small ferry, managed by Dougie Robertson since 2012 (ph 07468 417137)<sup>5</sup>. It plies between here and Fort William several times a day — very useful for shopping and avoiding the Fort William anchorage which is not at all nice. And just up from the ferry is the lovely Crofters Woods<sup>6</sup> with a couple of marked trails. Deciduous trees — and my first cuckoo of the year on April 19th 2011.

## Corpach

Canal basins are always full of delight and interest, this one certainly is with the addition of the dominating bulk of Ben Nevis as the backdrop to the start of the Caledonian Canal<sup>7</sup> (designed by the legendary Scottish stonemason and genius turned engineer Thomas Telford<sup>8</sup>, and opened in 1822). If you get the timing right there is an added bonus in the summer of the Jacobite steam train which runs along the line just behind the basin. Fort William is about four miles away so it might have to be a taxi ride unless you have a folding

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<sup>2</sup> <https://britishlistedbuildings.co.uk/200332397-churchyard-ardgour-parish-church-ardgour#.YebxuljP2X0>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ardgourales.scot/>

<sup>4</sup> R.T. McMullen. 'Down Channel', third edition. Horace Cox, London, 1903.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.highlandferries.co.uk/fortwilliam-camusnagaul.asp>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.wildlochaber.com/fort-william/walking/crofters-woods>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.scottishcanals.co.uk/canals/caledonian-canal/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://movingimage.nls.uk/film/2321>

bike on board. Or you can hire one of the electric bikes<sup>9</sup> that can be picked up outside the Kilmalie Community Centre just over the level crossing. There are a docking stations in Fort William itself, and other places of interest such as Neptune's Staircase and old Inverloch Castle. You could also explore further up the canal towpath to Loch Lochy but there are no docking stations there. The walk or cycle into Fort William is off the main road on Sustrans route 78 along the Caol waterfront, and then through the Inverloch estate built for the workers at the Fort William smelter and hydro scheme.

The one-mile walk up the canal to view Neptune's staircase<sup>10</sup> is definitely worthwhile, an amazing series of eight interconnected locks raising the water level by 20 metres. Slightly surprisingly. Just before you reach the road and rail bridge at Neptune's staircase you will find 'The Lochy' for pub grub (ph 01397 703587)<sup>11</sup>. The Moorings at Neptune's staircase itself is slightly more upmarket (ph 01397 772797)<sup>12</sup>.

A small community-owned marina opened in in 2023 (ph 07410 884902)<sup>13</sup>, I imagine mostly for local boats. There is a useful café attached to it which seems to be open most of the day (ph 01397 534002)<sup>14</sup>. There is a small Coop for supplies, on the main road just over the level crossing.

If you are feeling rich and posh and you don't want to reheat your ready-made dinner on the boat, you could take a taxi the four miles to the Inverloch Castle Hotel (a grand Victorian pile set in lovely countryside) for a £145 dinner (including coffee)<sup>15</sup>. Or arrive by helicopter. I have never done either.

## **Corran Point**

The pub — the Ardgour Inn — seems a bit of a disappointment to me, standard pub grub and no real ale. However, it is certainly very handy for the anchorage (ph 01855 841225).<sup>16</sup> (For beer and al fresco food head to Ardgour Ales, Camas Aiseig above You can sit outside the Ardgour Inn — or inside — having a drink while the children play on a very sandcastle sort of a little beach, adjacent to the ferry slipway. The wrecked fishing boat might look atmospheric but it is breaking up and becoming a danger. So far no one seems to be taking responsibility to remove it. There is a coffee shack adjacent to the hotel open every day except Mondays and Sundays

Take a walk round the foreshore to the Corran Point lighthouse — a Stevenson again, built in 1860, with a lovely two-storied keepers' house with an external stair. A most satisfactory ensemble, enhanced by the backdrop of Upper Loch Linnhe in one direction and Lower Loch Linnhe in the other. But not by the noise of the main road along the east side of the loch.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://hi-bike.co.uk/>

<sup>10</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neptune's\\_Staircase](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neptune's_Staircase)

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.thelochy-caol.foodndrinkscotland.co.uk/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.moorings-fortwilliam.co.uk/index.html>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.corpachmarina.co.uk/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://ancafaidhmara.co.uk/>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.inverlochycastlehotel.com/>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.ardgour.biz/>

There has been a ferry here for centuries and the modern version, taking cars since 1935,<sup>17</sup> is constantly on the go but is not a problem, in fact it is a charming addition to the general atmosphere. Some have seriously suggested a bridge which would ruin the whole place — but no doubt help regenerate Morvern, Ardgour and Ardnamurchan (for better or worse) However, someone would have to widen their single track roads to accommodate the inevitably increased numbers of motor-homes and caravans, along with the pressures of more and more tourists. In 2020 this idea was being very seriously considered by the Lochaber Chamber of Commerce<sup>18</sup>. The tunnel option sounds a better bet to me, there would then not be a problem for yachts with tall masts transiting the Caledonian Canal, or cruise ships if they still exist and are welcomed with all their pollution.

## Fort William

It is hard indeed to love Fort William, the self-styled Outdoor Capital of the UK. Nothing new about that, Frank Cowper described it 120 years ago as "*not a lively place*" and "*Its chief raison d'être now appears to be to act as a kind of Scotch Chamoni to the Mont Blanc of the British Isles*"<sup>19</sup>. Unlike Oban which embraces the sea, Fort William not only turns its back on the sea but then builds a 40mph dual carriageway and some very unpleasant housing to cut itself off from the sea completely — the 'Outdoor' clearly does not include the sea. The anchorage is not at all pleasant, and is exposed. However, in 2016 a small and rather cramped transit pontoon appeared, but mostly for cruise ship shore boats, and maybe visiting yachts too if they are not too big (there are plans to extend this facility). The local yacht club is friendly and has a couple of visitor moorings available for a charge<sup>20</sup>. If you are there on a Monday evening you could even join in with some racing round the buoys.

If you do get stuck in Fort William, there are certainly some things worth doing. The main street is pleasantly traffic free which is where you will find the West Highland Museum (ph 01397 702169)<sup>21</sup>, originally a bank, built in 1840. It is free so put a donation in the box. The layout seems rather eccentric, and it majors on the Jacobites as well as training commandos in the second world war (displaying some very fierce-looking knives designed to kill). I have not seen a birching table before — ideal for tying down a recalcitrant child and giving them a good thrashing (not allowed these days of course). Personally, I am not all that impressed with the virtual reality version of the long gone 18<sup>th</sup> century fort.

Naturally there are plenty of shops as well as a very good Morrisons supermarket — not as classy as Waitrose, but very adequate nonetheless, with a Lidle next door. And in 2017, a reversal of a UK-wide trend — a bookshop opened rather than closed, The Highland Bookshop<sup>22</sup>. And it is really nice — airy, spacious, friendly, well-organised, great selection of outdoor and Scottish books, and some second hand. For coffee and buns go to the Wildcat<sup>23</sup> or

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<sup>17</sup> <https://www.undiscoveredscotland.co.uk/corran/corranferry/index.html>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.lochaberchamber.co.uk/2020/06/fixd-link-at-corran-narrows-confirmed-as-viable-option-in-new-study/>

<sup>19</sup> Cowper *ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.lochaber-yacht-club.co.uk/>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.westhighlandmuseum.org.uk/>

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.highlandbookshop.com/>

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/TheWildcatFortWilliam/>

Rain Bakery<sup>24</sup> across the road — at Wildcat I didn't realise the cappuccino was vegan until after I had enjoyed it, and the cruffins at Rain are excellent.

For seafood go to the Crannog Seafood Restaurant<sup>25</sup> which is now in Cameron Square. It opened in 1989 to provide fresh local seafood direct from those who caught or farmed it (ph 01397 701873). The Lime Tree<sup>26</sup> (ph 01397 701806) has I am told a nice restaurant which features in a lot of guides, and there are beds too (I think the art gallery may have gone). The Stables Restaurant and grill<sup>27</sup> is a fairly recent addition, and is getting good write-ups, but I have not been there (ph 01397 700730). The widest range of beer can be found at the Black Isle Brewery<sup>28</sup>

The Highland Cinema in Cameron Square seems to be going strong<sup>29</sup>, showing a range of films and it has special events through the year. There is an attached bar and restaurant.

I have not been to the 13th century Old Inverlochy castle<sup>30</sup>. It is about a mile out of town towards Inverness (follow the Great Glen Way), just where the railway to Mallaig crosses the River Lochy. 'Pevsner' describes it as '*unloved*'<sup>31</sup>. Maybe more loved nowadays.

The Lochaber Leisure Centre<sup>32</sup> has a 25-metre swimming pool (ph 01397 704359). And as from 2016 you can try a bit of indoor climbing at the Three Wise Monkeys,<sup>33</sup> Fassifern Rd parallel to the High Street.

Maybe the best 'trip' is to take the Jacobite steam train<sup>34</sup> which in the summer runs up and down the fabulous 84-mile single track railway line to Mallaig, over the Glenfinnan viaduct made famous in the Harry Potter films. The track was opened in 1901 and thankfully, unlike the Ballachulish line, it remains not just open but actually used. Well maybe not by the steam train in 2024 if health and safety regulations put a stop to it – to do with 'unsafe' carriage door opening.

Given the proximity of the railway and bus stations, you can change crew here quite easily, but then it is not a place to linger in — better to base yourself in Camas nan Gall (see above) and take the ferry.

Finally, there is a webcam<sup>35</sup> to tell you if it is raining (it often is).

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<sup>24</sup> <https://www.rainbakery.co.uk/>

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.crannog.net/crannog-restaurant>

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.limetreefortwilliam.co.uk/>

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/thestablesgrill/>

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.blackislebrewery.com/visit-us/fort-william-bar>

<sup>29</sup> <https://highlandcinema.co.uk/>

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.inverlochycastle.co.uk/>

<sup>31</sup> 'Pevsner' is my generic term for all those wonderfully detailed books about the buildings of England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales which were started by Nikolaus Pevsner, the architectural historian, and written between 1951 and 1974. The two volumes you need are Argyll and Bute by Frank Arneil Walker, Penguin Books 1992, and Highlands and Islands by John Gifford, Yale University press, 2003.

<sup>32</sup> <https://www.highlifehighland.com/lochaber-leisure-centre/>

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.threewisemonkeysclimbing.com/>

<sup>34</sup> <https://westcoastrailways.co.uk/jacobite/steam-train-trip>

<sup>35</sup> <https://aboutfortwilliam.com/webcams/ben-nevis-and-fort-william>

## **Loch Eil**

I imagine very few boaties penetrate so far into the Highlands but this loch is well worth a visit. The narrow entry is just like a west-country river — steep and wooded, it might even be the Yealm in Devon. But you know it isn't because the houses by the shore are not nearly so posh.

The loch itself feels more of a freshwater loch, so cut off from the sea it seems to be — you could be sailing on Loch Tay. Surprisingly, the traffic, on the main road to Mallaig on the north side does not seem too intrusive, and of course the railway line adds to rather than subtracts from the charm, particularly if a steam train comes along.

The Camus nan Gall ferryman told me that there are grand sunsets up Loch Eil, he was quite right.

The only 'official' anchorages are at Duisky (Camas Dubh Uisge) and Rubha Mòr, but there must be many others to explore although I have not discovered anything of very great interest to see and do ashore, other than enjoy the countryside.