

Loch Etive

Last updated 6th January 2024



"To enter this loch is no easy task for a stranger, and as there are many more lochs quite as deep, quite as beautiful, and far easier of access, I should recommend that Loch Etive is looked at from the sea and left alone." So wrote Frank Cowper in 1896¹. It must have been reading that, and the dire warnings in the modern Sailing Directions, that persuaded me for years to avoid the Falls of Lora² at the entrance to the loch. But, summoning up courage and with my co-owner at the time, on one flat-calm sunny day in May, carefully planned at neaps, we gingerly motored under the Connel bridge³ and on through the Kilmaronag narrows to enter the loch. It was not a problem. Not so difficult as it appeared at first sight. Even the narrows at Bonawe

¹ 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.

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qipICFHRpxM>

³ <https://canmore.org.uk/site/23278/connel-ferry-bridge>

were a doddle, keeping left to avoid electrocution. I certainly didn't make such a mess of it as C. C. Lynam 120 years ago: *"The falls of Lora were in full roar, the tide being almost low. Hugging the south shore I was whirled along head to wind, which ought to have been aft, the dinghy led the way, and down the swirling decline went the Blue Dragon, stern first; only a few yards off was the great green waterfall over the central rock"*.⁴

It was then truly extraordinary to find myself amongst some of the highest mountains in Scotland, many of which are very accessible from the anchorages. All alone sailing up the upper loch with grand views ahead, and yet within a few miles of the hundreds of boats parked in Dunstaffnage Marina. This has got to be the best sea loch in the area, and one of the best in all of Scotland. There are a number of 'official' anchorages, and innumerable unofficial ones. Unfortunately I can't explore them now my mast is too high to get under the bridge.

Achnacloich Bay

Nothing much to see or do here, all the action seems to surround the mussel farm. You could walk round to Achnacloich House gardens but these are much easier to access from Stonefield Bay. Anyway, they were closed by the new-in-2012 owners, the public are no longer welcome (except on Saturdays).

Achnacreemore Bay

Not much to see and do here. If you go ashore you will find rather large and mostly architecturally-undistinguished houses strung out along the road. Houses that have surrounded themselves with high hedges so no one can see in, or with wooden fences for a quicker effect. And then called names like Wychwood, the Haven, and Beech Wood. Poor posties — nae house numbers here. There is no shop, no pub and no feel of neighbourhood. But maybe I exaggerate, almost certainly I do. No doubt a nice place to live, but nothing here for a seaborne visitor.

Airds bay

Bonawe Iron Furnace⁵ is nearby. It is of considerable historical interest, has been restored, and is looked after by Historic Environment Scotland. It was a charcoal-fired blast-furnace built in 1753, and it carried on until 1876, making mostly pig iron. The canon balls used by Nelson's navy in the Battle of Trafalgar were made here. Indeed, what is said to be the first monument⁶ to the battle and Nelson's death is a 'converted' standing stone in Taynuilt,

⁴ The Log of the Blue Dragon 1892-1904. C C Lynam, AH Bullen, London, 1907. Amazing and amusing account of cruises in the Hebrides, often in winter and sometimes single-handed, with many groundings, cock-ups and near misses. The 25ft centre-plate engineless yawl was built in land-locked Oxford, sailed down the Thames, round Lands End and up to Scotland, and the author "never had a paid hand on board, and never but once signalled for a pilot"! He was an unconventional and no doubt inspirational headmaster of the Dragon School in Oxford, which is why his cruises were all in the school holidays (these days I like to think he would have taught in a comprehensive school). He didn't like Cowper's Sailing Tours at all "His knowledge of the west coast and its people is gathered from two hurried cruises and merits rather the name of ignorance....contains nothing useful that is not taken from the official Sailing Directions."

⁵ <https://www.historicenvironment.scot/visit-a-place/places/bonawe-historic-iron-furnace/>

⁶ <https://canmore.org.uk/site/23495/taynuilt-nelsons-monument>

the nearby village. The charcoal for smelting came from the woods around about, there was plenty of water for the waterwheel to run the bellows, and the iron ore was shipped up from Cumbria. Wandering around the old buildings, now peaceful and quiet, and the lumpy ground which must be covering more ruins and slag heaps, it is difficult to imagine that this was once a hive of activity — lots of very sweaty men working very hard probably. Apparently 600 of them, and others around in the woods as charcoal burners. 'Pevsner' aptly remarks on the '*monumental quietness*' of the buildings, '*more ecclesiastical than industrial*'.⁷ It is all very well signed and certainly worth wandering around. Kelly's quay is the long turf-topped pier which was built for the ships to bring in the raw materials, and take out the pig iron — and the canon balls

Taynuilt⁸ is a bit of a walk, about 20 minutes or more, but there is a good general store, an excellent butcher, a post office, and the well-regarded Taynuilt Hotel which burned down and is being reconstructed in 2024. But in truth I don't see a lot of point in making the effort unless you really need provisions. There is also a 9-hole golf course⁹ not far from the shore.

Ardchattan Church

Not an official anchorage but you can anchor off the church.¹⁰ Sadly, in 2019, the church was sold off by the Church of Scotland, redundant to requirements, far too big with a capacity for 420 people, and too expensive to maintain (£115 000 the lot, but without the graveyard, but I don't know if it is still for sale). Built in 1836, it is severe, symmetrical and rather peaceful inside which is now of course locked (the wooden pews and central 30ft-long communion table are lovely) and outside (where the graveyard is well looked after).

Ardchattan priory

Again this is one of those places on Loch Etive where it is perfectly possible to anchor even though it is not in the Sailing Directions. Ardchattan House is said to be the second oldest house in Scotland, based on a 13th century settlement for Valliscaulian monks¹¹. It is now privately owned but the gardens¹² are open to the public thanks to the generosity of Sarah Troughton who presumably makes little if anything out of the donations (ph 01796 481355).

There are a lot of shrubs and trees. The south facing part in front of the house is more formal and yet very serene and attractive. It is enclosed by a beautiful east wall through which there is a gate to the remains of the originally 13th century church or chapel, with later bits. This was once part of the priory¹³ itself, before it became secularised in 1602 and partly converted into a private house which, according to 'Pevsner', is '*a strange and enchanting mixture of*

⁷ '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.

⁸ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Taynuilt>

⁹ <https://taynuiltgolfclub.co.uk/>

¹⁰ <https://canmore.org.uk/site/141079/ardchattan-parish-church>

¹¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Valliscaulian_Order

¹² <http://www.gardens-of-argyll.co.uk/view-details.php?id=470>

¹³ <https://canmore.org.uk/site/23259/ardchattan-priory>

ecclesiastical and domestic forms'.¹⁴ What you see now is mostly 19th century. Behind the main house you will find a very inhabited 'doocot' (dovecot in English) and tucked a bit further away in the trees, a kind of Hansel and Gretel cottage. Because the house is privately owned you shouldn't be wandering around after the gardens have closed (at 5pm).

Sailean Ruadh

This is much more intimate than the adjacent Airds Bay, completely quiet and surrounded by beautiful broadleaf woods which are carpeted with wild flowers — primroses, violets and celandine in May. Just up from the head of the inlet is what must be a man-made dam which forms a little lochan set in trees, which is very charming. Otherwise there is nothing specific to do or see here. But I am afraid in 2013 there was a threat to this anchorage — an over-large fish farm across the entrance. Planning permission was granted in 2014 but apparently one can anchor beyond the obstruction. Because my mast is now too high to get under the Connel Bridge, I can't go and look for myself.

Stonefield Bay (Linne na Craige)

You need to anchor as far away from the road noise as you can, best by the Abbot's Isle from where it is possible to get up to Achnacloich Gardens (strike up behind the boathouse and you will come to a little-used zigzag path which leads to the house and gardens)¹⁵.

But alas the gardens were closed to the public in 2012 when the owner died. I gather from local gossip that the house was then passed on to a relative, who lived in London and is apparently a banker. Oh dear, these days it is difficult indeed to love bankers. The house now seems to be a top-end rented holiday property, sleeping up to 18 people — snooker table, nursery, six bathrooms sort of a place. However, on Saturdays between 10 am and 4 pm you are allowed to get a squint at the gardens.

The house itself is rather dull, late-Victorian Baronial Gothic, but the woodland gardens are delightful. There are some tremendous trees here, Scots Pine and a nearly-200-year-old Douglas Fir just by the house. There are some nice lookouts over Loch Etive, with seats.

Upper Loch Etive

The loch above Bonawe is fabulous — remote, mountainous, empty and beautiful. No riffraff here. Curiously this is one of the few places where the old Martin Lawrence and the Clyde Cruising Club Sailing Directions diverge, the latter suggest far more anchorages. For example, Camus an t-Seilid is a wild and beautiful place, fabulous views all around, and yet easy to find and anchor in. I am sure there must be a lot of mountaineering explorations that one could start from these shores. Frank Cowper rated this loch highly too: "*The scenery is as wild and beautiful as can be wished, and forms a great contrast to the more sylvan landscape of the lower loch*".¹⁶

¹⁴ 'Pevsner' *ibid*.

¹⁵ <http://www.achnacloich.com/garden/>

¹⁶ Frank Cowper *ibid*.

