

# THE WEST HIGHLAND WAY

by Terry Marsh

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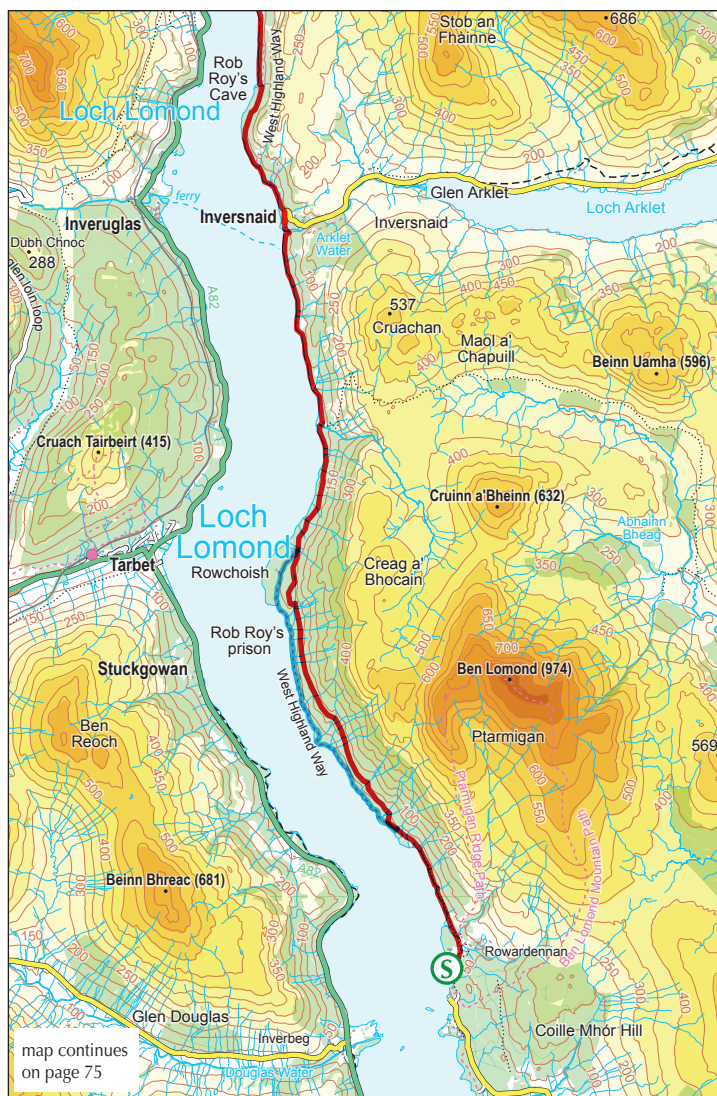
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## Acknowledgments

The process of writing a book such as this is inordinately more complex (I hope) than the act of following the walk. But it is a task made considerably easier by an increasingly rare breed of individual who actually doesn't mind helping people along – in my case by the simple expedient of providing companionship along the way. I'd like to thank Ron and Tom for their company, always appreciated, between Crianlarich and Fort William during the first run; and my son Martin who accompanied me during the whole of the second visit. And when I came to revisit the Way twice in 2010, I was accompanied by my brother-in-law, Jon, who was excellent company and always ready to partake of whatever malt whiskies were on offer.

*Front cover:* Black Rock Cottage, Glencoe (Stage 5)

### STAGE 3 – ROWARDENNAN TO CRIANLARICH



very variable terrain, which is constantly changing as new vistas of high mountains open up. Towards the end, for those feeling weary, it is possible to finish into Crianlarich on the A82 road (and, if you want to be punctilious about following the Way in its entirety, return to the point at which you joined the road the next day). But given the 60mph speed limit on this road, it makes sense to stick to the route and keep well away from the traffic.

To continue from **Rowardennan**, start up a broad forest trail, which soon reaches Ptarmigan Lodge, named after the satellite of Ben Lomond that lies directly above. Beyond Ptarmigan Lodge two routes become available. One descends towards the shoreline of Loch Lomond, and is undulating and arduous in sections, while the higher route is a more evenly graded trail. The National Park rangers advise that the lower route at Ptarmigan is better if walking with a day sack, but the higher forest road is preferred if carrying a heavy pack. The latter meanders progressively through the woodland and past Rowchoish bothy.

### ROB ROY MACGREGOR

Romanticised by Sir Walter Scott in the novel that bears his name, and more recently given the 'Hollywood' treatment, Rob Roy MacGregor is a figure that still looms large in Scottish history; a man who led an adventurous life with, apparently, an unconventional attitude to other people's property. Born in 1671 (some accounts say 1660) in Glengyle, he was the second son of Donald MacGregor of Glengyle, a lieutenant-colonel and chief of a sept (clan) of the MacGregors. Until 1661 the Clan Gregor had for almost a century been pursued with fire and sword (during this time anyone and everyone had not only the right, but the duty, to slay, harry, burn and dispossess any MacGregors they might find without recourse to the authorities – always assuming the MacGregors let them). This was later followed by proscription of the name MacGregor so that none might legally call themselves by the name – Rob Roy himself used his mother's name, Robert MacGregor Campbell.

For more than 25 years, Rob Roy lived a relatively settled existence at Balquhider. Nevertheless, his herds were so often plundered that he had to

rejoined the main line of the route, turn left through a gate onto a rough track that leads above Keilator Farm, still, it should be noted, following the course of Caulfield's military road. The first section follows **Glen Falloch**, and there are fine views to the south of An Caisteal and Beinn Chabhair.

The ongoing track eventually leads to a very low tunnel, by means of which walkers pass beneath the A82 and the railway line beyond, to continue uneventfully to **Derrydaroch**. From here the route is never far from the glen river, crossing it at Derrydaroch Bridge and soon passing the Falls of Falloch, and staying more or less parallel with the river all the way to Beinglas Farm at Inverarnan. Directly above the farm, the Ben Glas Burn produces impressive waterfalls.

South from Beinglas the route is never in doubt, but gives some of the most difficult walking – especially for those with heavy packs. Within a short distance, the river bears away from the path, which now climbs to pass through a gap between a low hill, Cnap Mor, and the high Munros to the east.

*Cnap Mor is a significant point, that at which Wayfarers leave the rugged delights of Glen Falloch for those of the Loch Lomond basin. The great loch lies immediately ahead, and arrival here, at Ardleish Farm, should be treated with some minor form of celebration. In a sense, you are on the final leg, albeit with some way still to go.*

The route now follows the shoreline of Loch Lomond all the way to the unexpected hotel at **Inversnaid**. The going is not the easiest, although it is easier following improvements than it has been for some years.

The onward section, south from Inversnaid, continues to call for care and attention until, not far from the bothy at Rowchoish, Wayfarers reach the end of a broad forest trail, which now leads easily out to **Rowardennan**.

*On the way the route passes a crag known as Rob Roy's Prison, where, according to legend, he held prisoners and hostages. Whether that was ever so in reality is another matter, but it serves as a timely reminder that the Way has been passing through the lands of Clan MacGregor.*

After Rowchoish, there is the option to divert onto a lower path that courts the loch shoreline and emerges back on the main forest trail near Ptarmigan Lodge. This is a more demanding route. The National Park rangers advise that the lower route is better if walking with a day sack, but the higher forest road is preferred if carrying a heavy pack.

Not too far away is the battle site of Dalrigh, where Robert the Bruce suffered a defeat in 1306. It was following this that Bruce granted the monastic settlement the status of priory – logically, it might be assumed, because he received spiritual support from the monks following his defeat. The true site of the priory is thought to be closer to the Holy Pool, a short distance upriver.

The most widespread of the tales about St Fillan concerns a sign given to Robert the Bruce as he prepared for the Battle of Bannockburn. The accounts tell how a relic of the saint, an arm bone in silver, had been brought to the battlefield as a token of good fortune. As Bruce kneeled, praying before it, the case opened to reveal the relic, much to the astonishment of its guardian, who sensibly had brought only an empty case to Bannockburn.

From the priory, cross a cattle grid and go along a broad track that leads to **Auchtertyre** Farm. Beyond this, cross the Allt Auchtertyre and turn left to walk out to rejoin the A82, near the Holy Pool.

The **Holy Pool** (just a short distance off the Way) is said to be the original site of St Fillan's Priory, and the place where insane persons were bathed in the chilly waters before being taken to the chapel to be tied up all night to the font – a treatment that also involved St Fillan's bell being placed over the head of the person. No records seem to exist to suggest that the treatment actually cured anyone.

Cross the busy road (although a nearby underpass is preferable) and press on along a rough track accompanied by the often-turbulent River Fillan. The path shortly swings round to reach an old highway close by a bridge, known locally as White Bridge (Artisan café, 5min walk, left, over White Bridge). A few strides on, the highway divides, the West Highland Way bearing left at a signpost, while the route to the right – the continuation of the former glen road

Press on beyond the Glen Nevis descent point and continue to follow the forest trail until you reach the large Braveheart Car Park. You can leave the trail here by going forward to join the glen road and by this way arrive at the original end of the West Highland Way at Nevis Bridge.

From just above the car park, however, a fine path ascends left (yellow-band waymark), climbing steadily to a high point overlooking Fort William, the confluence of Loch Linnhe and Loch Eil and the isolated townships of Banavie, Caol and Corpach. The ascent is not unduly demanding, and many take the view that this alternative finish is a more fitting conclusion to this excellent trail than walking down the glen road.

After the high point (convenient bench nearby), continue on the path, ignoring the branching paths for the Cow Hill Circuit. The path now descends steeply to Fort William town centre. Ignore a branching path, and keep forward for the town centre, eventually dropping in zig-zags to a car park at the rear of the leisure centre. Walk out to join the A82.

The original end of the West Highland Way, should you want it, is now to your right; the new finish, on the far side of Fort William town centre, is to your left.

## FORT WILLIAM

An Gearasdan (The Garrison) in Gaelic, is second only to Inverness in population in the Scottish Highlands. The name alludes to the location's use as a base for English troops garrisoned here to pacify Clan Cameron after the so-called Wars of the Three Kingdoms (the British Civil Wars) from 1639 and 1651.

During the Jacobite rising of 1745, Fort William was besieged from 20 March to 3 April 1746. However, although the Jacobites captured the other forts in the chain of three Great Glen fortifications (Fort Augustus and the original Fort George), they failed to take Fort William.

The town today rests very much on the tourist trade, primarily from visitors intent on ascending Britain's highest mountain, passing through on their way to the Isle of Skye and the wild north-west of Scotland, or tackling the West Highland Way, the support for which has grown considerably in recent years.

## Accommodation Kinlochleven

*Compared to the first day on the Way in the south to north direction, this reverse direction requires rather more effort, although it is not overly demanding. After a brief walk out of Fort William, the route makes a challenging and undulating climb through the confines of Nevis Forest. Once above and free of the forest (much of which has been cleared), however, the route is sheer delight all the way to Kinlochleven, allowing you to enjoy the largely inaccessible quarters of Lairigmor, the Big Glen.*

The new start of the West Highland Way begins at the southern end of town (NN 099 736), at a statue. From here walk along the main street, and later bear right along the A82, continuing to the roundabout at Nevis Bridge, where the West Highland Way originally began.

The West Highland Way originally began at Nevis Bridge. From here bear right along the road into Glen Nevis. Ahead and slightly to the left is the bulk of Meall an t-Suidhe, squat before the even greater bulk of Ben Nevis.

*Fell-racing mankind contrive to run up and down Meall an t-Suidhe from the Town Park just outside Fort William in under 28mins (men) and 34mins (women), and dismiss Ben Nevis, the highest mountain in Britain, in 1hr 25mins and 1hr 43mins respectively. They can complete the West Highland Way – on which you are about to spend a week or so – in under 16 hours (men) and 17 hours 30mins (women). Such levels of fitness and stamina are unlikely to be needed by regular Wayfarers – so, other than as a mark of respect, spare no further thought for such endeavours, and start along the route into Glen Nevis.*

As the route continues into the glen, so the distinctive profiles come into view of Sgùrr a' Mhàim and Stob Bàn, further up the glen. Along the way pass a large boulder by the roadside, the so-called Wishing Stone or Stone of Counsel (Clach Comhairle) to which various legends have been ascribed.

Beyond the cemetery, and just 1¼ miles (2.2km) into the walk, leave the road at a waymark (NN 122727) and follow a narrow path towards mixed woodland. Climb easily for a short while to meet a broad forest trail.

## Variant starts

This same point may be reached by two variant starts from Fort William, as follows: