

7th St Magnus Conference Field Trip: How water has shaped Perthshire from the Iron Age to the present day



Loch Tay and Ben Lawers Image © Don Gillies, CC BY-SA 2.0

Itinerary

- 9 am: Leave UHI Perth Main Car Park

- 9:30am: Dunkeld
 - Drop-off near Cathedral
 - Free wander to view cathedral ruins or visit shops
 - 10:00am: Departure from Dunkeld North Car Park (n.b. toilets available in car park, but 50p cash-only charge)

- 10:50am: Scottish Crannog Centre, Loch Tay
 - 11am Tour
 - 11:20am Crannog Talk
 - Freedom to roam
 - 1pm lunch (included)
 - 1:40pm departure

- 2:30pm: Pitlochry Dam and Fish Ladder
 - Walk from West End Car Park to Visitor Centre (10 minutes)
 - Explore Visitor Centre exhibitions
 - Café and toilets available
 - Cross dam to fish ladder
 - Return walk to West End Car park for departure at 4:30pm

- 5:15pm Arrival at UHI Perth

The next day, traversing an open and uninclosed country, Edward gradually approached the Highlands of Perthshire, which at first had appeared a blue outline in the horizon, but now swelled into huge gigantic masses, which frowned defiance over the more level country that lay beneath them.

Walter Scott, *Waverley* (1814)

Welcome to the conference field trip! After two days of thought-provoking papers dealing with all aspects of human interaction with water, we spend today exploring the ways in which water has shaped people and their environment in Perthshire from ancient times to the present day. Throughout the day we will explore landscapes which have inspired industry, art, literature and music.

Dunkeld



Dunkeld Cathedral Image © Diliff, CC BY-SA 4.0

*cloisius borb béolu bendacht
bátar oc Taë- tol Ríg*

‘with a blessing he subdued the mouths of the foolish ones who were near the Tay. This was the King’s will.’

Amrae Coluimb Chille (ed. and trans. Jacopo Bisagni)

Scholars are still in disagreement about whether the verse above, part of an elegy on St Columba, genuinely dates to shortly after his death in 597, or might instead be an early-ninth-century creation reflecting the importance of Dunkeld around 200 years later. In any case, the relationship between Iona Abbey in the Gaelic-Speaking Kingdom of Dál Riata (roughly Argyll, in what is now the West of Scotland), and the Tay basin in the heart of southern Pictish territory, likely goes back to at least the late seventh or early eighth century. In fact, the name of the local Pictish Kingdom, Atholl, may mean 'New Ireland', reflecting the strength of these links with the Gaelic world.

Long before the first use of the term Atholl in any of our sources (AD 839), another term is associated with the area: *Caledonia*. Roman sources describe the Iron Age inhabitants of Central Scotland as *Caledonii*. While the term seems to have gone out of active use by the eighth century (perhaps replaced by Atholl), it still survives in a number of place names. Dunkeld is one of them- *Dùn Chailleann* meaning 'fort of the Caledonians'. The fort in question is almost certainly the fort on King's Seat overlooking the town, which was active from the fifth to seventh centuries AD.

The cathedral which now stands at the site of the early medieval establishment was built over a two-hundred-and-fifty-year period beginning in the late thirteenth century. The nave is now a ruin following the loss of its roof in the sixteenth century. However, the choir is still in use as a parish church (open from 9.30 in April).

On 21 August 1689, the Battle of Dunkeld was fought in the town between Jacobite Highland clans supportive of James VII, and the Scots Army (specifically the Cameronians) supportive of William II. The battle resulted in the deaths of around 300 Jacobites and around 45 Williamites. Much of the town was destroyed. The subsequent rebuilding of the town in the eighteenth century resulted in many of the buildings visible today.

Dunkeld was the home of one of Scotland's most notable fiddle players- Niel Gow (1727-1807). More recently, the town has been associated with the folk singer-songwriter Dougie Maclean- appropriately, the composer of 'Caledonia'!

Scottish Crannog Centre, Loch Tay



Crannog reconstruction, Loch Tay (pre-2021) Image © Martin Dawes, CC BY-SA 2.0

*When I've done my work of day,
And I row my boat away
Doon the waters of Loch Tay
As the evening light is fading
And I look upon Ben Lawers
As the evening glory glows
And I think on two bright eyes
And a merry mouth below.*

Loch Tay Boat Song, Harold Boulton (1859-1935)

Our journey now takes us to the banks of Loch Tay, where we visit the Scottish Crannog Centre. Crannogs can be defined as 'artificial small islets, on which one or a few dwellings were built'. These are often located quite far from the shore: often tens of metres. There are around 1200

crannogs known in Ireland, 600 in Scotland and 1 in Wales. Given the large variety of structures that can be described as 'crannogs', it is perhaps unsurprising that their date range covers an enormous period of time- from the Neolithic to as late as the seventeenth century AD. The height of crannog creation in Scotland was however the Iron Age (c. 800 BC- AD 400). Evidence for eighteen crannogs has been found in Loch Tay.

A reconstructed crannog at the Scottish Crannog Centre sadly burned down in 2021. The building of the first of three new reconstructions is nearing completion. The centre also has a reconstructed Iron Age village and a museum with various ancient artefacts. Artefacts found at the Oakbank Crannog on the loch include possible evidence for Iron Age music: a whistle (though this may be most likely for hunting or herding) and a possible bridge of a stringed instrument.

Pitlochry Dam and Fish Ladder



Pitlochry Fish Ladder Image © Robert Breuer CC BY-SA 3.0

The impulse that moved in Kern's salmon as it met the fresh water was equally unaccountable. Its long journey was through a slowly changing blue and not until it came within a depth of six hundred feet did the first tinge of green appear. This represented the coming of light, and light, equally with fresh water, plays its mysterious part in the life of the salmon, whose pilgrimage is ever between light and darkness. At one hundred feet, orange and red, the warm colours, are still absent, but the blue is now irradiated with green, and the eyes that have for so many years known only degrees of shadow, reflect at last a colour like the sky at evening when seen over the ridges of far hills where rivers rise. The salmon is swimming back to the source of its life.

Highland River, Neil M. Gunn (1937)

We now move from an ancient to a modern human mark on the aquatic landscape. Pitlochry Dam and power station began electricity generation in 1950. It is part of nine stations in the Tummel Valley scheme. This came as part of an explosion in hydro electric development in the Highlands in the 1940s and 50s, which saw the construction of 54 power stations, 78 dams and 300km of tunnels.

The change to the landscape brought by such huge structures had a massive impact on the ecology of the area. Salmon and trout had the potential to be particularly affected by dam construction due to their annual migrations from the sea up rivers for breeding. The safeguarding of fish stocks was a requirement of parliamentary approval for hydro-electric schemes. The Pitlochry fish ladder allows fish to pass the dam using 34 tiered pools. Over 250,000 salmon have crossed the ladder since its creation in 1952.

The hydroelectric scheme is operated by SSE, who run the museum on site. This includes displays on the dam and hydroelectrical developments and on ecology and the ladder itself.