2·2 The Caledonian Canal

The Great Glen fault is what made the Caledonian Canal possible. Only 22 miles of this historic waterway are man-made; the other 38 rely on the natural waterways of Lochs Lochy, Oich and Ness. The Great Glen Way clings closely to the canal route all the way from Corpach to Fort Augustus. Thereafter it diverges to its north, joining the canal very briefly in the final approach to Inverness.

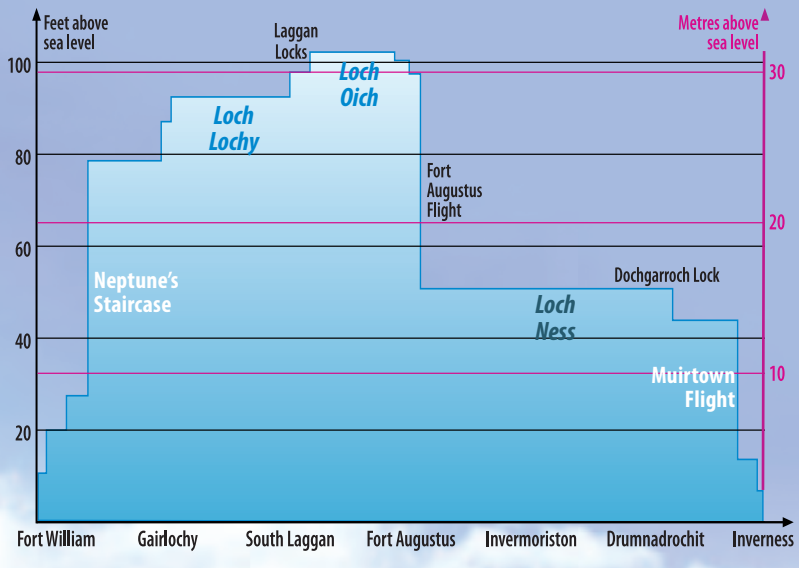
The canal was first proposed in 1773, and was designed by two engineers, William Jessop and Thomas Telford, with work beginning in 1803. Jessop took on Telford, the son of a Dumfries-shire shepherd, as his assistant and although they worked on it jointly, Telford seems to have been given most of the credit.

It was an ambitious venture, demanding the moving of huge amounts of material and creating work for up to 1200 labourers. Telford and Jessop had proposed a canal depth of 20 feet, but dredging problems restricted it to about 14 feet. It took 19 years to complete, and cost £912,000 - a huge sum of money at the time. There were great celebrations when it finally opened in 1822.

The canal was built mainly to create jobs and boost trade, but commercial use was never great, partly because of its limited depth. It was a lifeline for lochside communities in an era when roads were poor or absent. Later, it provided a safe passage, avoiding the Pentland Firth, for thousands of naval vessels during World War 1. Otherwise leisure craft became its main users. It was paid for entirely by public money, and remains the earliest example of nationalised transport in Britain.

The maximum size of ships that can navigate the canal is 35 foot beam by 150 foot long by 13·5 foot draught (or 160 foot long by 9 foot draught), and the speed limit is six miles per hour (9·7 kph). For contact details for the canal and its operating hours and regulations, see page 78.

Boat passing through Cullochy Lock



Its highest point is Loch Oich, at 106 feet (32 m) above sea level. Water drains from its southern end towards the Atlantic, and leaves its northern end towards the North Sea. Differences in level between the lochs are handled by 29 locks, each of which raises or lowers the level by up to eight feet. From the towpath, it's fascinating to watch the boats being worked through the locks.

Notice as you walk that after the watershed the lock gates open in the opposite direction. Lock gates are always angled so that the pressure of water at the higher level holds them closed. This is obvious in the photograph of Neptune's Staircase, a flight of eight locks which lifts boats by 64 feet (19·5 m) over only 1500 feet (457 m) horizontal: see page 44.

Originally locks were worked by muscle power and leverage. The lock-keeper slotted a long wooden pole into each of the outward-facing sockets and rotated the capstan to open or close a lock gate. The poles were sometimes stored on top of the capstan in a tall pyramid supported by square sockets set into the top.

Capstans were worked by leverage

Muirtown locks

Although by 1968 all the locks had been mechanised, many of the capstans are still in place on the towpath. There is a good example, complete with poles, in the Canal Visitor Centre in Fort Augustus: see page 55.

The canal has many other interesting features, including ten swing bridges and various weirs, aqueducts and tunnels.

There are distinctive pepper-pot lighthouses at Corpach, Gairlochy, Fort Augustus and Loch Dochfour (Bona). Originally they were occupied and worked by lighthouse-keepers, but later all were automated.

Walking to the sea locks

To see the canal 'end-to-end', it's worth extending your walk to visit both sea locks. To reach Corpach lighthouse from Fort William is a short diversion from the Way: see page 42.

At the Inverness end, the sea lock is 1·7 miles (2·7 km) from the end of the Way at Inverness Castle. To reach the canal at Muirtown Bridge by a simple route (not the best, but easy to navigate), cross the River Ness just north of the castle. Turn third right at the traffic lights up Kenneth Street, which becomes Telford Street. Follow it to reach the bridge across the canal: the Muirtown flight of four locks is to your left and the boat basin to your right. See the plan on page 76.

Corpach sea lock with lighthouse

Muirtown Basin once served as a second harbour to Inverness, but after ships became larger, its use declined. On its west side there's a wall plaque that celebrates Telford's achievement with a poem written by his friend Robert Southey, then Poet Laureate, to celebrate the canal's opening.

Clachnaharry sea lock

Follow the towpath along the west side of Muirtown Basin. To reach Clachnaharry sea lock, you must cross the railway line – it's unsupervised, so take care – then walk out to the small beacon. The sea lock was built out into the water because of shoals in the Beauly Firth, and it affords great views of the Firth (look out for dolphins and seals) and Ben Wyvis to the north-west. Cross the canal by any lock gate to return to Muirtown Bridge along the east side of the basin.

The Caledonian Discovery option

Caledonian Discovery has been offering their own week-long version of the route since before the Great Glen Way opened in 2002. Their *Walk the Great Glen* itinerary (which can also be cycled) follows the Way closely for most of its length, but runs between Banavie and Clachnaharry sea locks. The barge moves while its guests walk or cycle, allowing the distance to be split comfortably over five full days and two part days. They also offer options to canoe the Great Glen or to bike it in a 3-night cruise.

The company operates two Dutch barges, Fingal and Ros Crana, which accommodate 12 guests each, and which also carry bikes, canoes and other equipment. Because you sleep onboard, you never have to carry more stuff than you need for the day, and the deal includes all meals and a guide when ashore. See page 78 for contact details.

Fingal motoring along Laggan Avenue