

## **Highland canals and railways which today provide some of world's best tourist experiences - Professor Edward Sweeney**

**Scotland is a divided country: almost torn in two by a mighty geological fault, the Great Glen which runs diagonally through Fort William to Inverness. Exactly 200 years ago our greatest civil engineer Thomas Telford completed his signature project the Caledonian Canal, which threads its way along a 60-mile route with 29 locks linking the Glen's four lochs to provide a great tourist experience – whether or not a monster is spotted on Loch Ness.**

A “levelling-up” project of its day, the Canal's construction provided employment for over three thousand local people. The post-Napoleonic peace meant that the expected use by the Royal Navy did not materialise, and development of steam-powered iron-hulled ships soon put commercial traffic beyond its 15-foot draught. However, in the Great War components for the construction of mines were shipped this way en route from America to 'US Naval Base 18' at Inverness, and fishing boats used it to avoid possible enemy action on the longer route around the north of Scotland. Repaired in the decade to 2005 with renewal of all the lock-gates, the canal is today a Scheduled Ancient Monument in the care of Scottish Canals, who are planning a celebration of its bicentenary this autumn.

From the Great Glen westwards, the scenic road to Kyle of Lochalsh heads through Shiel Bridge at the head of Loch Duich, from where an old military road ascends the mighty Mam Ratigan Pass. This is Jacobite country, and where it reaches the coast at Glenelg the ruins of Bernera Barracks recall the suppression after the 1715 Rising when General Wade and Major Caulfeild began the road-building which ironically would speed Bonny Prince Charlie's advance thirty years later.

Today Glenelg is a peaceful jumping-off point for the world's last hand-operated turntable ferry, a design enabling vehicles to load and unload at any state of the tide. This is the MV Glenachulish, operated by the Skye Ferry Community Interest Company, which between April and October enables cars, half-a-dozen at a time, to cross the narrow tidal race to Skye at Kylesku. Lovingly restored by her present owners, the vessel was built at Troon in 1969 originally for use at Ballachulish, where the ferry was replaced by a bridge in 1975 – a reminder of how much Highland communications have advanced in our lifetime – and after stints at Kylesku (where another bridge would open in 1984) and Cromarty came to Glenelg in 1982.

The crossing at Glenelg neatly compliments two other means of crossing from the mainland to Skye: the ferry from Mallaig, terminus of the West Highland railway, to Armadale and the Skye Bridge which opened in 1997, replacing another ferry which linked Kyle of Lochalsh with Kyleakin. Today, having heroically survived two closure attempts in the aftermath of the Beeching Report, the Dingwall and Skye Railway brings travellers four times daily into Kyle of Lochalsh on the 82-mile journey from Inverness.

This is a journey which was likened by travel writer Alexander Frater to a symphony in three parts – pastoral through the fields of Easter Ross, mountain from the Raven Rock summit past lochs, peaks and forest to Strathcarron, and marine as it twists and turns along the shore of Loch Carron opposite the mountains of Applecross to emerge in a dramatic conclusion at Kyle of Lochalsh facing across to Skye.

To travel the Kyle Line is to recall recent television history, for it was Michael Palin's journey here for the BBC in 1980 which first established its claim as one of the great scenic railways of the world. Thus was begun the modern genre of personalities narrating train journeys: and for the Monty Python star, revealed as an enthusiast for public transport, it was to mark the starting-point for something completely different, a new career-direction that would take him many times across the world.