

TRAVELLING IN THE WEST HIGHLANDS IN THE 1800s

by Archie McGill

Ancient drove roads which have been in use for many centuries carried, among others, King's messengers from Falkland Palace to Scone Palace. Then through Yettes o' Muckairt, Glen Dochart, Tyndrum, Portsonachan ferry, Glen Nant, Musdale, Kilmore/Kilbride, Kerrera Ferry, Grasspoint (Mull) and on to Fionnphort and Iona. The mortal remains of Kings travelled this route for burial on the island. Cattle were driven in the opposite direction from the islands before steamers were available and had to swim the various sea and loch crossings.

Journeying in the West Highlands and Islands was often very arduous and, at times, almost impossible. In winter sometimes a coach could be used but, due to much of the terrain, a pony or horse was often more suitable. Bridle paths and drove roads were well travelled when convenient, but using these ran the risk of robbers etc. In the early part of the 19th Century this was the only means of travel other than by sea.

Sailing ships called with cargo to the only pier at that time - the South Pier, which was then owned by the Duke of Argyll. The Pier Master's house was built in 1812 where pier dues were collected for Argyll Estates. Of course not many large boats could berth there due to the size of the pier. The first real advent of safe travel was a visit of Bell's paddle steamer *Comet* which travelled between Oban and Crinan. Unfortunately, it was wrecked at Craignish Point about 1820. By 1840, David Hutchieson started a steam ship company and made a base from which he travelled to the Western Isles. David Hutchieson was married to a sister of David MacBrayne and they formed the company; however the need for another pier was obvious so eventually the Earl of Breadalbane and the two partners decided to build a new pier, which is where the North Pier is today. This opened the flood-gates for more piers; at Lismore, Tobermory, Ellenabeich, Ardgour, Port Appin, Fort William and Connel, to name but a few. Crofters could now sell their produce in Glasgow and return with goods etc. The paddle steamers were able to carry cattle and sheep as well as goods of all kinds. For example, in 1861 Donald Cameron Esq. travelled from Glen Brittle in Skye to Connel to purchase from Donald MacCallum, tenant of the Dunstaffnage Arms, machinery to cut peat at a total cost of £3.02. What his fare cost for this journey is not mentioned. Connel pier, clearly accommodated paddle steamers and travellers could stay in the Dunstaffnage Arms.

With the advent of steam, Oban was soon to expand. The population rose to 2000 until the coming of the railway in 1880. As early as 1850 there was talk of a railway. I remember my grandfather Archibald McGill, who had a tailor's business in the town, telling me that the idea was thought of over a barrel of whisky in one of the local inns! But that is another story...