

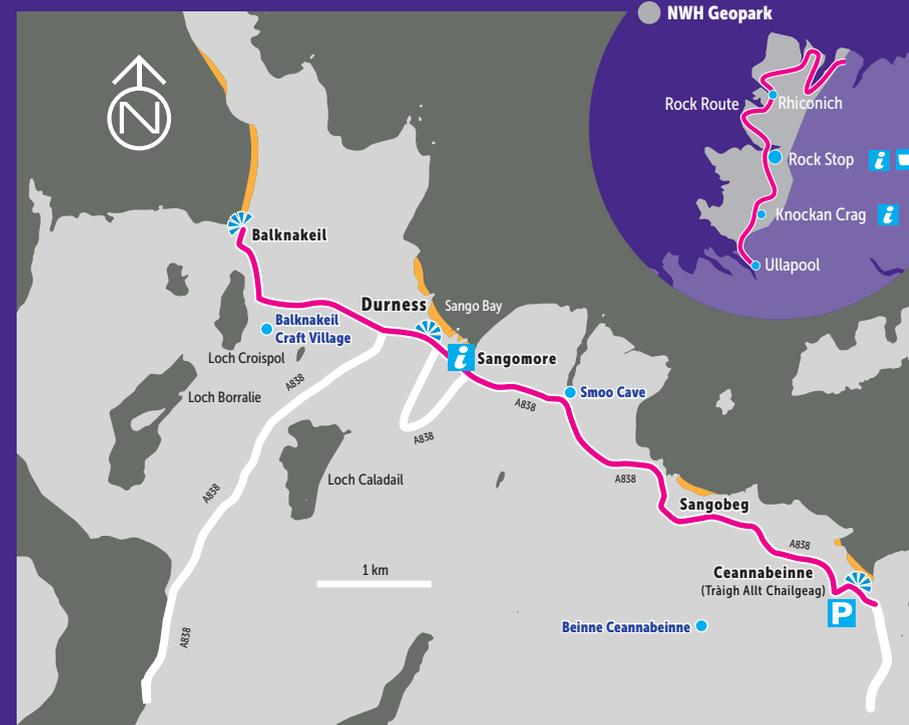
Storm Over Cape Wrath

by Nicola Poole

Fonn diasach, 's mor a b'fhiach e  
Gu fiadhach 's gun i,  
Aite sìobhalt' ri doineann,  
Is nach crìochnaich a'ghaoth.

Country rich in deer and cattle  
And in sprouting corn,  
Land protected from the tempest,  
Sheltered from the storm

Rob Donn MacKay (translation Ian Grimble)



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# Pebble Route 4



The far north westerly tip of the British mainland is possibly our best kept secret. Green rolling hills give way to rugged, colourful cliffs and white sandy beaches with turquoise waters. Most, like **Balnakeil, Sangomore** or **Ceannabeinne**, are just a few minutes' walk from the road.

This really is as far North West as you can get on a road in the British Isles without catching the small ferry from Keoldale to Cape Wrath.

Earning a living is hard here and there is no doubt that the reason Durness is still such a vibrant community is due to the hard work and determination of the diverse mix of families from many different backgrounds. The underlying limestone produces a naturally fertile grassy oasis in a landscape otherwise characterised by peat making cultivation particularly viable (and as the Norse found out, for deer grazing).

Limestone isn't the only rock here, in fact, in just the c.25km<sup>2</sup> covered by Pebble Route 4 there are 19 different types. Perhaps this is why Durness is teaming with wildlife too. From puffins to minke whales, over 800 species have been recorded. Call into the visitor center in

Durness to see Donald, the Highland Council Ranger and find out more.

## What is a Geopark?

Geoparks are set up and managed by a local community and there are more than 100 Geoparks worldwide.

Every community is different and so every Geopark is different but we all share a common aim which is to tell the story of our landscape and make it accessible to visitors.

This in turn helps to bring resources into sensitive rural areas, creating jobs and supporting small businesses.

## What is the NWH Geopark?

A Social Enterprise, set up by the representatives from the six community councils within its boundaries. It exists to:

## Explore Deep Time, Evoke a Sense of Place and Encourage Stewardship

This means encouraging adventures for everyone which helps people connect with the land and feel responsible for maintaining its beauty, wildlife and resources.

Evoke a Sense of Place

Explore Deep Time



### **The end of the mountains**

If you start your journey at **Ceannabeinne** you can walk down to the **Tràigh Allt Chailgeag** beach and marvel at the colourful, banded and folded Lewisian Gneiss. These rocks are amongst the oldest in the world and were formed from the early crust of the Earth. They have been buried deep underground, heated and squeezed to form the beautiful swirling patterns we see today.

Ceannabeinne means the 'end of the mountains' and if you climb to the top of Beinn Ceannabeinne and look south on a clear day it's easy to see why as the long line of mountain sentinels face the Atlantic Ocean. However the Gaelic name is particularly apt, as this is the place where geologists discovered that the Scottish mountains were once part of the Appalachian mountain range in North America.

### **Stories from a working landscape**

Head west towards Durness village and you'll come to a bend in the road where you may note several cottages framed by lines of dry stone walling running down to the sea. These strips of land form the traditional crofting 'in-bye', areas designated for growing vegetables or fodder. Today most crofters earn a living by working in some other sphere as well as keeping animals or growing produce

but there are incentives available for making the land more productive such as through planting native trees. **Balnakeil craft village** was set up in 1963 to accommodate skilled craft workers, many of whom own crofts in the area. The project was incredibly successful and today you can meet the many local artisans and browse their outstanding galleries.

### **A limestone chasm**

Continue your journey and pass Smoo Cave at the end of a long inlet (geodha). The slightly acidic Alt Smoo river has cut into the soft limestone here forming a deep cleft. The word 'Smoo' is actually from the Norse 'smjuga' meaning creek or cleft. The river drops from the road level down a sink hole forming waterfalls within Britain's largest limestone cave. There's a boat trip into the cave system and many myths and legends have grown around its dark,

mysterious depths. Perhaps some of these started when the first settlers of the north coast sat cooking and eating their shell-fish here 10,000 years ago...

Durness village is a bit further along the road, once you get here, take the right turn towards Balnakeil Craft Village. Why not call in on your way to Balnakeil beach?

### **Balnakeil beach**

Baile na cille as it is spelled in Gaelic means the 'place by the church', which likely refers to the ruined kirk near the carpark at the end of the road. According to Vatican records, the church dates back to at least 12th century. From here there's a few options for walks. Head towards the golf course for a clifftop walk and look out for

incredibly rare Scottish Primroses, or cross the beach to Faraid Head, where the cliffs rise to 100m above the sea. A Viking boy's grave was discovered by chance in the sand dunes here in 1991. He was buried with a brooch pin, comb, beads, a sword and shield and gaming pieces dated to the 10th century AD.

*Encourage Stewardship*



*Traigh Allt Chailgeag* NC443654



*Balnakeil* NC391687

Photography: Kevin Arrowsmith