

## Warmed by a Wooden Heart

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SEEN from the car-park at the top of the Cairngorm ski road, the plain below seems carpeted by undulating forest, broken only by the waters of Loch Morlich. Thousands of tourists pour into the area daily, to ski in the season, to climb the mountains, to walk the forest trails, to sail the loch or picnic on its shores.

In the early years of this century the scene at Glenmore was very different – no skiing, of course, no tourist traps, no reindeer farm, no cafes – only a gabled shooting lodge (now the youth hostel) with its seasonal guests, a few rural inhabitants in the scattered cottages, and not many visitors – perhaps an occasional tweed jacketed (and usually well-heeled) mountaineer exploring the silent hills. The line of the present ski road (built in the 1960s) was a mere cart track.

Exactly 80 years ago, however, there was a sudden burst of activity in Glenmore as a great logging enterprise got under way. The woods were filled with the sounds of axe and circular saw, the crash of falling timber, the neighing of heavy horses, and the jangling of their harness. This was at the height of the Great War, when thousands of men were dying daily on the Somme; when vital imports were threatened by the U-boat campaign and home-grown timber was urgently needed for the war effort.

The foresters who cut down the old pinewoods of Glenmore were Canadian lumberjacks, members of the newly-formed Canadian Forestry Corps. Several hundred were camped in Glenmore where one of their first tasks was to build a network of light railways through the woods to bring in the logs and then to transport the sawn timber to the railhead at Aviemore – then still only a small Highland village. But, in spite of all this activity, it's not easy to find traces of the lumberjacks' work. The camps were levelled, the rails lifted; seedlings grew up in place of the old pines and, in the course of time, new plantations were established.

One man who has made a study of the Canadian lumbermen's work in the First World War is David Rose, an Englishman whose enthusiasm for railways brought him to Aviemore to help on the steam-operated Strathspey Railway, and then prompted him to explore the woods in the hope of finding where the wartime timber railways ran. A study of old maps, newspaper files, and other documents has helped him on his way. Some day he hopes to be able to piece all the information together and publish the results.

In the meantime he agreed to act as my guide. So last month three of us set off from a car-park east of Loch Morlich, following a broad forest road which soon entered an area of desolation where trees had recently been clear-felled as part of Forest Enterprise's programme of removing spruce, larch, and other 'exotic' species from the native pinewoods. David observed with some dismay the adjoining mounds of excavated gravel – for forest works have already obliterated part of the evidence he's seen on earlier visits.

We came to the little brown burn, the Allt Rabhaig – that must have served as water supply for the logging camp, though it looked barely adequate for the needs of around 200 men – splashed across it, plunged into the shaggy groves and found, shaded by mature trees that have grown up since those days, two crumbling, moss encrusted concrete blocks, for all the world like forlorn relics of some earlier civilisation. These, it seems, are all that's left of the sawmill.

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Rusty bolts poked from the one on which the saw bench was probably bedded. David believes the other block supported the boiler that provided power for the steam-driven saw. Poking about in the vegetation below it he found a piece of metal curved on one side and straight on the other, which he recognised from his days as a railway buff. Steam locomotives have similar bars on their fireboxes.

Other traces of [the] past use began to appear on the ground – the line of an overgrown ditch, the parallel grassy ridges which suggested sleepers buried under the turf. Then among the litter of the clear-fell, dug into the slope, we saw four rectangular depressions in the black rubbly soil, outlines of the foundations of huts where the men had lived.

Only a few hundred yards away the world went by. People in bright jackets strolled and chattered along the forest road, or rattled by on mountain bikes. We could see and hear them but I doubt if they knew we were lurking there in the fringes of the forest. If they did catch a glimpse of us they might have wondered what we were up to.

We emerged to follow the evident bed of a railway track curving along above a swampy area thick with green stumps, where standing pools reflected the leaden sky. Glimpses of an inlet of the loch were visible from time to time below.

It soon became apparent that the route was lined by moss-encrusted, rotting logs which once had supported the rails, and at one spot, where the ground fell away steeply, the old timberwork was exposed to sight, reddish and rotting but still keeping its shape. David bent down and drew out a rusty iron spike; it came away cleanly after all these years.

Later I wrenched out from the vegetation a large piece of rusting iron, curiously angled. We looked at it this way and that, but its function escaped us all. I felt a mite guilty at such careless manhandling of the archaeological evidence – though, in truth, I feel that Forest Enterprise is a greater culprit, even if an unwitting one.

The line now fed into the forest where, enclosed in dark trees, it was subsumed into a minor forest trail (at intervals posts with a red band on them) and ceased to give any tangible sign of its former existence. The surface underfoot was smooth, thickly matted with brown pine needles. As it stretched ahead it took a bend upwards through an overgrown cutting, whose shaggy banks rose above us more than head height.

Little wooden bridges cross two sudden gullies. Eighty years ago the railway line was carried over on timber trestles, nothing of which remains now but a few scattered and half-buried timbers rotting away slowly nearby. At the second gully there's evidence of greater disturbance – the timbers are strewn about confusedly and when we pulled back the matted vegetation covering some of them we discovered that they were blackened, as if by scorching. David's theory is that the original bridge remained in place until the Second World War, when Norwegian Commandos training in the area blew it up as an exercise in sabotage.

At length we parted company with the forest trail and continued exploring along a bumpy, little-used forestry road. Just before the plantation boundary, where you can look across to the brown hills at the far side of the loch, we came to the end of the line. Here still stood a stack of timber, sadly eaten away below its rough felting of moss, but still recognisable, piled up in

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readiness for the trip down to the lochside sawmill. But the last wagon train never came. The war ended, the Canadian lumbermen returned to their native woodlands, and the logs were left to rot down into the soil.

We sat on the stack, ate our sandwiches, and philosophised on the slow transience of things.

The Canadian lumbermen left other traces of their work elsewhere in this neck of the woods. Close to the clay-pigeon shooting range, not far from Coylumbridge, you can see the sweep of the old railway route as it twists round through the trees. According to David, the postman delivering letters to Glenmore Lodge in the 1930s preferred to cycle along the line – he called it the corduroy road – rather than on the bumpy cart track that the ski road would eventually replace.

At that time traffic from Aviemore for Glenmore took a more circuitous route, following the road to Boat of Garten and turning north just past Loch Pityoulish. It is now a forestry road (emerging at the western end of Loch Morlich) used by the occasional walker or cyclist.

Down below it lies a secret glen, curiously named the Sluggan. Secret, because there's no path to follow and for most of the way the Milton burn flows unseen through it, masked from view by thick strands of trees. For a short stretch it enters a dramatic, deep gorge invisible from above. Down there, too, the Canadians were at work in the Great War. They ran overhead cables to yank the logs down from the steepest slopes, and alongside the burn (and sometimes over it) they built a trestle railway to extract the timber.

A few days after our expedition with David, I returned to Loch Morlich to traverse the Sluggan, stumbling through boggy flats, jumping back and forth across the narrow burn, clambering over rock falls in the gorge, pushing through trees when they encroached. Birdsong and the clatter of the water over stones apart, it was silent and peaceful. I met no-one, of course, saw no-one - who'd think of venturing into that deserted byway? And who'd think that the discovery of three old timber piles, lichened, wasted, fractured and nibbled away by the elements till the more resistant knots stood out like bunions, poking up aslant from the stony bed of the burn, would give me such a surge of excitement?

Why? For here were the last remnants of that lost trestle railway, Canada come to the Cairngorms, still defying decay these 80 years after. Ah me, I feel another bout of philosophy coming on.

*Source: <https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/12323532.warmed-by-a-wooden-heart/>, accessed on 15th July 2019.*