

General Wade, his road and Kings House inns

Strathdearn was very much part of the highway between Perth and Inverness, though now often bisected by the new A9, or re-routed. I have walked this road all through the Tomatin area, from Slochd summit to Alt na Slanach at Moy, and taken photographs. Some stages are excellent, others obscured by recent roadworks or forestry. Wade's main structure locally was the three arch stone bridge built by General Barrington across the River Findhorn, at Raigbeg, which ensured safer passage rather than the earlier fords. Unfortunately, this was destroyed by the tremendous spate in August 1829. There is an interesting account of the disaster in a book "The Moray Floods" by Dick Lauder, with a sketch of the remnants on page 30. Local landowners paid to have a temporary wooden bridge erected just downstream of Wade's one and even now, at low water level, pairs of posts protrude, supports for this bridge. The approach road, original dyke and abutment are clearly recognisable, on the Tomatin Estate side of the river, near what is now known as Wade's Cottage, but earlier OS maps refer to it as Bridgend (confusing, as that name now refers to dwellings by 1926 bridge).

The "powers that be" in 19th Century obviously had a rethink about bridging the Findhorn. Wade's original road from Slochd was re-routed to the west of the high ground, ridge "Tom beg", rather than the former east side, and is known as the "Parliamentary road" – this was altered again with the coming of the railway in 1898, and became the old A9 ultimately. The next bridge was constructed about 1½ miles upstream from Raigbeg and is sometimes referred to as "Telford's bridge" but, in reality, it was built by Joseph Mitchell. It was very pleasing, but again I believe it succumbed to the violence of the river. No notes available. Anyway, a redoubtable concrete edifice was put in place in 1926, and you either like it or not!

The connection with General Wade remained in the centre of the community however, with his road going from Wades Cottage, across what was once the local golf course, then between the Freeburn Inn and river; up the escarpment by Invereen, and on to Moy. The Smithy, now called Coalhaugh, may well have been a staging post originally, named after Caulfield? The poor horses must have been very glad of respite, after the arduous haul up from the Findhorn. It is said travellers had to disembark from their coach or conveyance, and put a shoulder to the wheel in some places!

You asked about the King's houses, and Inns. Dalmagarry was indeed one of these, and is a fine upstanding farmhouse to this day, owned by the MacQueen family. In 1745 it was home of the famous local hero, Major Gillies MacBean, who lost his life fighting at the Battle of Culloden, after accounting for many of the opposing force. Freeburn was another Inn, and also a trysting place for drovers to rest themselves and their beasts, en route to Falkirk and, ultimately, Smithfield. It was a popular local hostelry until it was bought in recent times by the Little Chef company. The original building still stands, used for storage and staff requirements, but the modern additions have been built with sympathy and not too many awnings or arc lights! The steading and stabling have gone, replaced by the restaurant building, but we rescued the old threshing mill and it is now among the agricultural exhibits at the Highland Folk Museum at Kingussie.

Mention also Inn at Moy-

Tomatin House belonged to the MacBean family from 1639 – 1928 but I know nothing about political or historical affairs in their time, though major upheavals were taking place, and Wade's road passed their policies. We have only found a few lead musket balls, but have no way of knowing if they were fired in defence, or for something for the kitchen .

I will not weary you now with 'little local stories', apart from the fact that Wade's road goes through one of several Late Bronze/Early Iron Age hut circles of an early settlement, never investigated – but I would gladly trowel away should help be needed!

☺ Ann Glynn-Percy

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