

26/08/1819

THE DATE THAT TRANSFORMED THE NORTH WEST COAST OF SCOTLAND

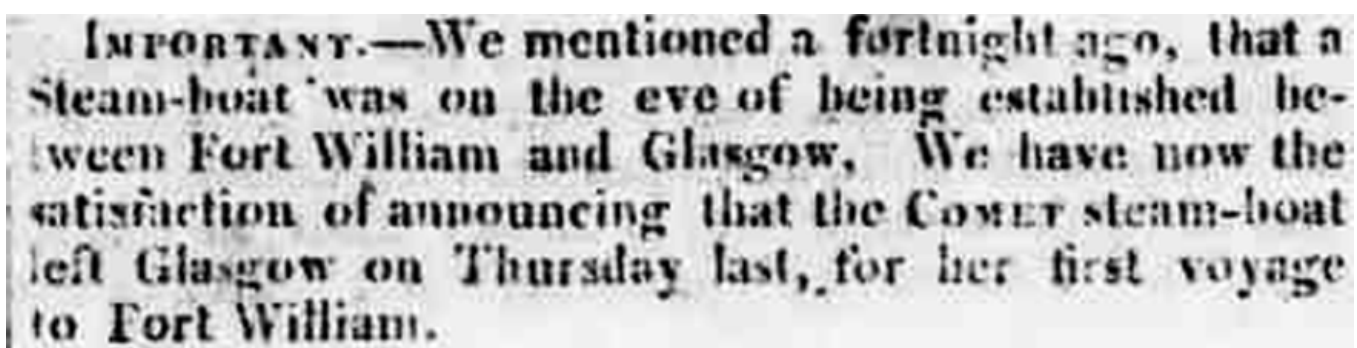


Two Paddle Steamers meet around mid-day
at Oban Pier c.1840

On the 2nd of September 1819 the **Inverness Courier** reported !

‘We now have the satisfaction of announcing that the Comet Steam-Boat left Glasgow on Thursday last, for her first voyage to Fort William’.

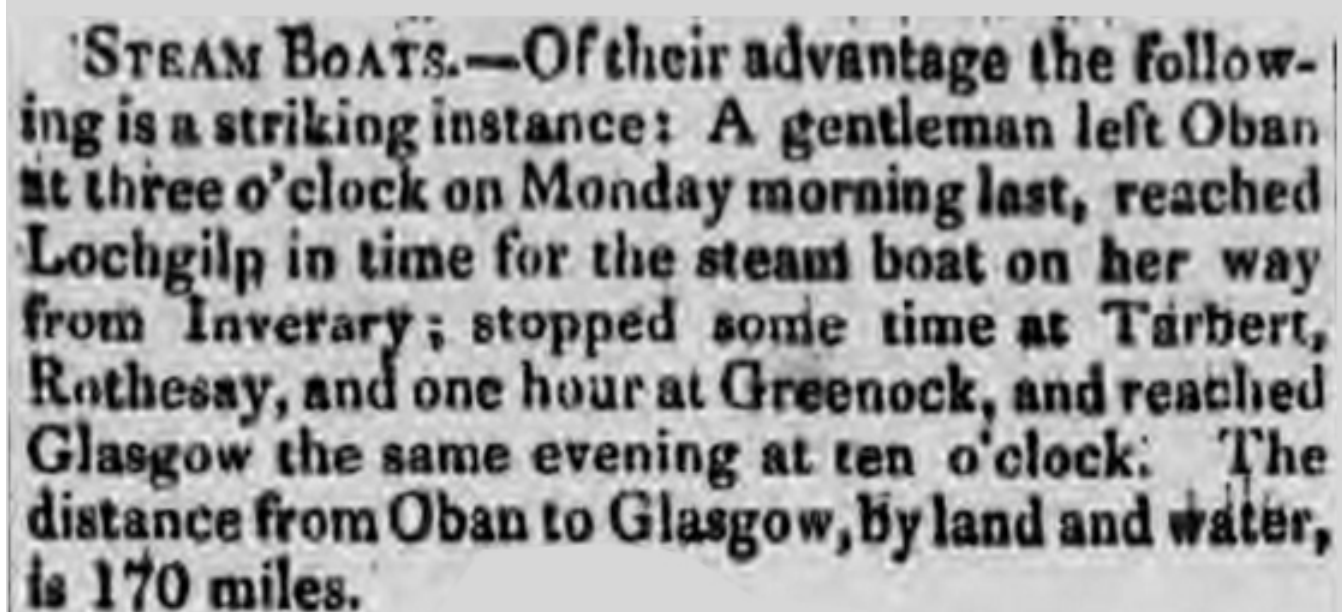
Thursday last was the 26th August 1819.



IMPORTANT.—We mentioned a fortnight ago, that a Steam-boat was on the eve of being established between Fort William and Glasgow. We have now the satisfaction of announcing that the COMET steam-boat left Glasgow on Thursday last, for her first voyage to Fort William.

2nd September 1819

From 1812 Steam boats were travelling the Clyde and into Loch Fyne but the North West Coast was completely unserved beyond Inverary. Before paddle steamers arrived all journeys to and from the remote, yet well populated, highlands and islands to Glasgow, Edinburgh and beyond, took days and even weeks. For centuries the options were; on foot (known as shank's nag or pony), or by sail, restricted by the winds and tides. If you had money, you could hire a highland pony, with short cuts by rowed ferry boat across both freshwater lochs and sheltered sea lochs. Before 1819 there were drovers tracks between the bens and down the glens. Roads, both military and civil, were poorly maintained except for some improved roads south of Oban. The first report of a gentleman travelling from Oban to Glasgow in one day was in April 1818.



STEAM BOATS.—Of their advantage the following is a striking instance: A gentleman left Oban at three o'clock on Monday morning last, reached Lochgilp in time for the steam boat on her way from Inverary; stopped some time at Tarbert, Rothesay, and one hour at Greenock, and reached Glasgow the same evening at ten o'clock. The distance from Oban to Glasgow, by land and water, is 170 miles.

Reported 25th April 1818

The 26th August 1819 was an extremely significant date for the North West of Scotland. The first regular paddle steamer, known before 1850 as a 'steam packet', or 'steam-boat' was the **Comet**. Owned and promoted by Henry Bell of Helensburgh, she was built in 1811 and entered service on the 6th August 1812. She was the very first, regular passenger paddle steamer service in Britain! She sailed every second day, except Sunday, from the Broomielaw in Glasgow 'doon the water'. Down the Clyde to Greenock, returning Monday, Wednesday and Friday. She ran to a timetable. Occasionally, this timetable was subject to delays due to the tides! The upper river approaching Glasgow Broomielaw Quay was still shallow. Later dredging improved access to Glasgow quays and wharfs.

Within a few years paddle steamers had radiated, south, east and west, to London (1814), to Edinburgh and Hull, to Liverpool and Dublin and many ports in-between.

The Margery steam engine packet, from the Clyde, arrived safe at London on the 24th instant, after a very quick passage. This is a convincing proof that steam boats may go to sea in any season of the year

14th December 1814

The neglected north of Scotland beckoned Mr Bell. Recent improvements to the Crinan Canal and the imminent completion of the Caledonian Canal, made a timetable service to the west coast, to Fort William and on to Inverness a reality.


The improvements and repairs which we announced some time ago as carrying forward on the Crinan Canal, under the direction of Mr Telford, the engineer, are now brought to a conclusion, DESCRIPTIVE TEXT OMITTED. The facility and safety with which vessels can now pass through this canal, since the lock gates were renewed, and numerous acute rocky bends cut off, will occasion a great saving of time, and consequently render the expence much less, and

sequently render the expence much less, and cause the danger of going round the Mull of Kintyre to be entirely avoided. We may add that, when that great national work the Caledonian Canal is navigable, a regular communication may be established through both canals by means of steam packets or otherwise, so as to afford a cheap and expeditious conveyance for goods or passengers, to the most remote parts of the Highlands.—*Greenock Herald*.

1st January 1818

In 1819 Bell lengthened and re-engined the **Comet**, before commencing the new and regular time table service from Glasgow to the North West coast of Scotland. The **Comet** left Glasgow on a Thursday. She steamed down the Clyde, through the Kyles of Bute, up Loch Fyne, through the rebuilt Crinan Canal, calling at Oban - just a village - finally steaming into Fort William! The **Comet** returned on a Monday. Unfortunately, the first **Comet** was lost on rocks at Craignish Point near Crinan on the 15th December 1820. A second **Comet** was soon built. Her first voyage north was on the 6th July 1821. She was advertised as, 'elegant, commodious and substantial... with most excellent boilers'!

Advert (right) for the second **Comet** from 4th October 1824. The second **Comet's** first voyage from Glasgow to Fort William was on 6th July 1821. Tragically, on the night of 21st October 1825, the second Comet was involved in a collision with the **Ayr** steamer.



COMET STEAM BOAT.

THE PROPRIETORS of the COMET STEAM BOAT have to give notice that the COMET sails from GLASGOW to INVERNESS, and from INVERNESS to GLASGOW, on the WEDNESDAYS of each week alternately; and will continue to do so until further notice.

Port William, 4th October, 1824.



STEAM BOAT EXCURSION

TO THE
WEST HIGHLANDS.

AT the request of a number of Friends, the ARGYLL STEAM PACKET will sail from the BROOMIELAW, on THURSDAY the 16th August curt. at five o'clock morning. After leaving GREENOCK, GOUROCK, ROTHSAY, and CAMPBELTON, she will sail round the MULL of KINTYRE, and proceed to PORTASKAIG, in the ISLAND of ISLAY, from thence to the ISLANDS of COLONSA, ICOLMKILL, STAFFA, ULVA and MULL, and return by TOBERMORY, AUCHNACRAIG, OBAN, EASDALE, and CRINAN, and calling at Islay will return to Glasgow, visiting the same ports as she did outward. It is impossible to say the exact time that may be required to perform the trip (suppose five or six days) but there will be no more delay than is necessary for the Passengers visiting the various interesting objects with which they must be gratified.

Every attention will be paid to the accommodation and comfort of Passengers.

Glasgow, 21 August 1821.

By 1821 the **Argyll** paddle steamer was pioneering a second route. The time table ran from Greenock, via Gourock, onto Rothesay and Campbeltown, round the Mull of Kintyre and on to Islay, then north to Colonsay, and on to Iona (known then as Icolmkill). Followed by Staffa and Ulva, round the north of Mull then south via Tobermory, Auchancraig (Loch Don), Oban, Easdale and Crinan. Finally, she steamed via Islay and the same ports back to Greenock.

The second **Comet** to Fort William was soon joined by the paddle steamer the **Stirling**, running up and down Loch Ness and the southern section of the Caledonian Canal.

The canal was a massive engineering project, designed by Thomas Telford and started in 1803. The project aimed to help the Highlanders, help the fishing industry and prevent ships having to navigate the fast tides in the Pentland Firth and sail around the extremely exposed Cape Wrath. The final section of the canal was completed, years late, in 1822. The canal now offered a steamer service all the way to Inverness. Rival steamers soon appeared. The **Ben Nevis** offered travel to Inverness while the **Castle** paddle steamers, the **Inverary Castle** (1,2,3), the **Rothsay Castle**, **Toward Castle** and **Windsor Castle**, competed for the route from the Broomielaw to Inverary.

LOCHNESS STEAM PACKET.

**THE STIRLING,
Captain D. Urquhart,**

LEAVES INVERNESS for the CRINAN CANAL every TUESDAY MORNING, at Five o'clock, and returns on FRIDAY NIGHT, with the Glasgow and West Coast Passengers; while the NEPTUNE, which comes to the South point of the Crinan Canal, will go forward on THURSDAY, with the Lochness's Passengers, for Glasgow. A neat Track-Boat is handsomely fitted up for carrying the Passengers along the Crinan Canal. By this arrangement, the above Vessels, which are too large to pass through the Canal, will, in conjunction with the Track-Boat, afford a much more commodious and speedy conveyance than has yet been offered to the Public on this line. One of these Packets will call at Port-Glasgow, Greenock, Rothesay, Tarbet, Lochgilphead, Crinan, Luig, Easdale, Oban, Port-Appin, Corran-Ferry, Fort-William, Corpach, Lagan, Fort-Augustus, and Foyers, till further notice.

By these conveyances, the Tourist, for the small sum of 24s. 6d. in the First Cabin, and Second Cabin 16s., can see the romantic and sublime Scenery of the Western Islands, and the Great Glen of Scotland; and likewise pass through the great national undertaking the Caledonian Canal, and the Lakes.

The LOCHNESS STEAM PACKET will sail for TOBERMORY, STAFFA, &c. every second week, wind and weather permitting, beginning this week.

Inverness, 13th September, 1824.

**CONVEYANCE TO TOBERMORY, AND
STAFFA AND IONA.**



IN order the better to accommodate Parties inclining to visit STAFFA and IONA, it has been resolved to discontinue sending the HIGHLANDER Steam Boat to Skye in future. The HIGHLANDER, however, will continue to sail regularly

from the Broomielaw on Monday, weekly, for TOBERMORY and STAFFA and IONA, calling at Oban, Easdale, and other intermediate Ports, as usual; and the Public are respectfully informed, that the following arrangement has been made as to the hours of sailing for the Season:—

Aug. 7,	- - -	Two o'Clock	Afternoon.
— 14,	- - -	Nine do.	Morning.
— 21,	- - -	Half-past One do.	Afternoon.
— 28,	- - -	Half-past Eight do.	Morning.
Sept. 4,	- - -	One do.	Afternoon.
— 11,	- - -	Eight do.	Morning.
— 18,	- - -	Twelve do.	Noon.
— 25,	- - -	Half-past Seven do.	Morning.

There is always a well supplied Table, with Wines and Liquors, of the best quality, kept on board.
Further particulars will be learned, by applying to Mr. A. McEachren, No. 9, Turner's Court.
Glasgow, 20th July, 1826.

**THE
BEN-NEVIS STEAM PACKET,
CAPTAIN BAIN,**

WILL SAIL from GLASGOW to INVERNESS, on Thursday the 16th current, and return from INVERNESS on Wednesday the 22d; after which she will continue to leave GLASGOW and INVERNESS on the WEDNESDAY of each week alternately till further notice; calling at all the intermediate places as usual.

For particulars apply to ROBERT STEWART, 128, Broomielaw.

Glasgow, 10th September, 1824.

**COMET,
CAPTAIN DUNCAN MACLEAN,**

**WILL SAIL FROM
GLASGOW TO INVERNESS,
EVERY MONDAY MORNING
till farther notice;**

Calling at Greenock, Rothesay, Lochgilphead, Crinan (where she remains the first night.) Luig, Easdale, Oban, Port-Appin, Corran and Fort-William (where she lies the second night); and, passing through the

CALEDONIAN CANAL,

Calling at Fort-Augustus and Foyers, she arrives at INVERNESS on Wednesday evening; and returns the same course, leaving INVERNESS every THURSDAY.

FARES TO INVERNESS. {Cabin, £1 10s.
 {Steerage, 18s.

AND INTERMEDIATE DISTANCES IN PROPORTION.

There is a Good Table served on board at a very moderate rate.

Fort-William, 1st Sept. 1824.

**"FACTS ARE STUBBORN THINGS."
THE INVERARY CASTLE
STEAM PASSAGE VESSEL,
Captain JOHNSTON,**



WILL Sail from the BROOMIELAW, on WEDNESDAY MORNING the 26th July, for INVERARY,

calling at PORT GLASGOW, GREENOCK, GOURLACK, ROTHESAY, and the usual places in Lochline, and will return to Glasgow on Thursday.

Hour of sailing to be seen on the Boards.


From the great quickness of the sailing of the INVERARY CASTLE, she makes her Passage from an hour to an hour and a half quicker than any other Boat that sails for Inverary. Passengers may rely on reaching Inverary in twelve hours. Those who wish to leave Glasgow on Tuesdays and Fridays, may have Tickets for Rothesay (where they can stay that night), either by the Rothesay Castle or Inverary Castle, at the same fare as going direct from the Broomielaw for Inverary.

24th July, 1820.

By 1821 the **Highland** Steamer offered a regular service to Loch Don (Grass Point) on the south coast of Mull. Very soon she offered a service to Tobermory calling at Aros (Salen, Mull). In the same year the **Highland Chieftain** pioneered a route to Skye and offered to commence a

regular service in 1822. Paddle Steamers on the pre 1830 Tobermory route included; the **Highland Chieftain**, the **Highlander**, the **Maid of Islay**, **Ben Nevis** (every two weeks to Stornoway, from June 1828), and the **Maid of Morven**. The **Maid of Morven** was loved by locals, renamed in Gaelic, (**A' Mhaighdeann Mhorairneach**), and remained in service until 1841. After 1830 the route was serviced by the **Tobermory**, **Rob Roy**, **Dumduck**, the **Inverness**, **Staffa**, **Helen M'Gregor** and the **Brenda**. By 1840 the **Glen Albyne** had even visited St Kilda and paddle steamers were crossing the Atlantic!

STEAM BOAT TO FORT-WILLIAM.



THE Public are respectfully informed, that the HIGHLAND-ER Steam Boat sails regularly from the BROOMIELAW every TUESDAY, calling at GREENOCK, ROTHESAY, LOCHGILPHEAD, OBAN, & LOCHDON, and leaves Fort-William on the following Friday, calling at the same places on her return, and from the superiority of the vessel, and the expence which has been laid out for the accommodation of Passengers, the Proprietors have no doubt that they will receive the patronage of the public.

As the HIGHLANDER calls regularly at LOCHDON, in Mull, she affords an excellent conveyance to parties going to visit

COLMKILL & STAFFA.

There is an excellent Boat provided at Lochdon, which will carry them to these places in a very short time.

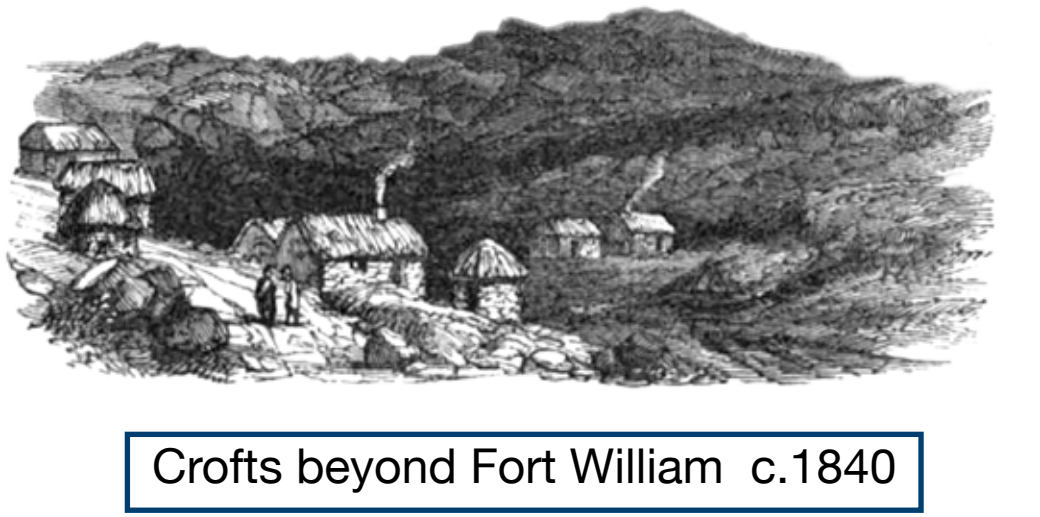
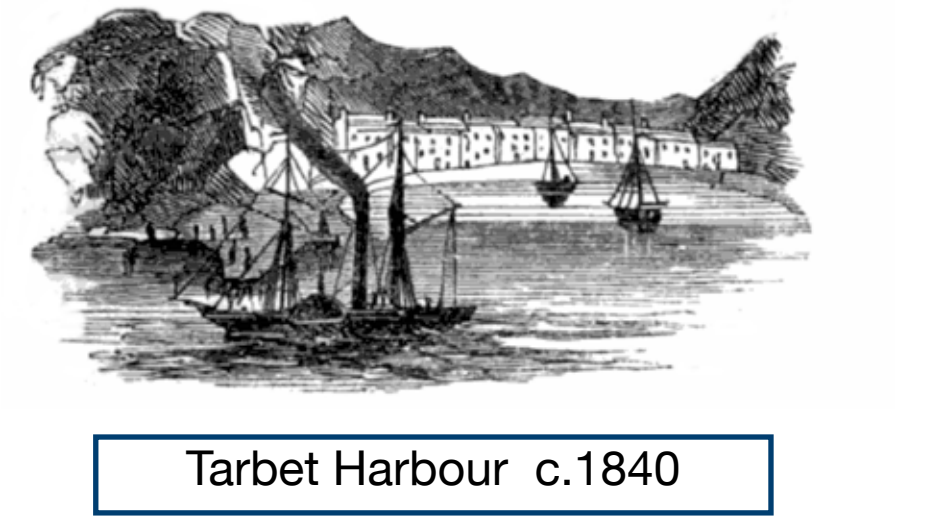
STEAM BOAT TO SKYE.—On Thursday the 7th ult. the Highland Chieftain Steam-boat returned from her trip from Glasgow to Kyleakin in Skye. She completed her voyage to that place, which is 240 miles from Glasgow, in 35 hours and 50 minutes, and she completed her voyage home in 40 hours and 16 minutes, notwithstanding having experienced the violent gales we had at the beginning of the month, and having to contend with many of the very rapid currents in the narrows along the Western Coast. We understand that the proprietors of this Boat have resolved to ply her between Glasgow and Kyleakin by Crinan, Oban and Tobermory, during the ensuing summer; and, being admirably calculated for affording comfortable accommodation to passengers, she will afford an excellent opportunity for visiting the Hebrides, which hitherto have in a manner been excluded from the stranger.

By late 1824, paddle steamers were meeting twice a week in Fort William and Oban to transfer passengers north to Inverness and west to Tobermory, then on to Skye and soon to the Western Isles and Stornoway. Rival Steamers transferred passengers at Crinan on to a new ‘Track-Boat’ built to take passengers through the canal. There was a second transfer at the south end (Ardrishaig) to the steamer **Neptune** and on to the Clyde

From Glasgow, new routes to the north west were opened up over inland Lochs. The **Euphrosyne** and the **Lady of the Lake** sailed on Loch Lomond. Much later in 1844 one company even built a small canal at the head of the loch to access the Inn at Inverarnan. The outline of this canal can still be spotted on Google Earth.

Around 1827, a new and novel route was also opened to Inverary via Loch Eck. Passengers were taken down the Clyde aboard the paddle steamer **Venus** to Kilmun. On board the **Venus** passengers were entertained by a steam organ! From Kilmun, coaches transported passengers overland to Loch Eck. A freshwater Loch where the steamer the **Anglia**, (the first made of iron), took one hour to cross to the head of the Loch! More coaches and horses then took the passengers to Strachur. In 1829 a new ‘driven by steam’ land coach was used to transport passengers to Strachur. From Strachur the ferry **Thalia** crossed Loch Fyne to Inverary. Total time from Glasgow to Inverary was 7.5 hours in 1827. The age of steam at work and play! This is the route that Mendelssohn travelled back from Staffa!

The advent of a regular paddle steamer service with a time table, changed the North West coast for ever! Coastal towns, from Inverary, to Oban, to Fort William, to Tobermory and beyond, experienced huge increases in trade and early tourism. As a consequence, populations expanded all along the coast to meet demand. New piers and shops with accommodation above were built. Many were two and three stories high with fireplaces, chimneys and sliding sash windows. These tenement style properties were built from 1820 to 1860. Only a mile inland, crofters lived in extremely dark, damp, open hearth, earth floored, thatched, single story croft houses with open stone walls packed with earth, to keep the gales out!

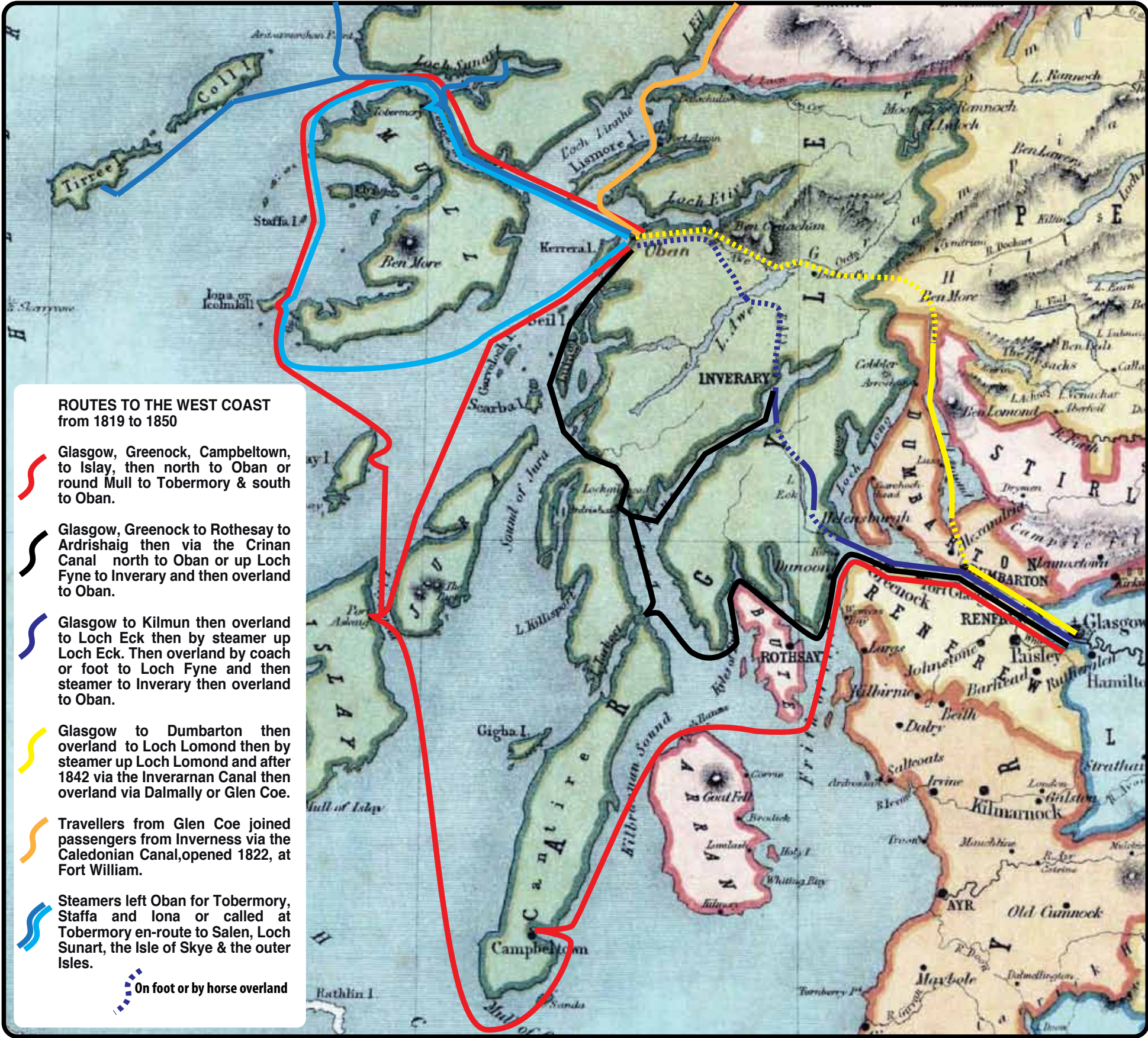


There could have been an early ‘down-side’ to this history as the new and regular steamer services may have played an involuntary part in the clearances and in mass emigration through circumstance. The kelp trade, which around 1810, employed thousands of crofters, collapsed at the end of the Napoleonic war. The reason - Westminster lowered the duty on imported alternative products, resulting in many highland families moving south to work in Glasgow and beyond. The Clearances - Highland landowners, some in financial difficulty, forced people off the good land to make way for sheep and alternative land management. The Famine years - when the crops failed in the 1840’s, resulting in mass emigration by sail and steam.

There was an ‘upside’, as the government invested in new piers and harbours to arrest highland population decline. The government also employed local labour to construct island piers during the famine years. The steamers were also employed to transport salt herring to feed the expanding industrial labour force to the south.

History sees the ‘Steam Age’ as transformational - as transformational as the new electronic age! I regard the first steamer service offered by the **Comet** and other paddle steamers as the most transformational change in the history of the Highlands and Islands and especially to the coastal towns.

The Highlands and Islands were soon visited by well known historic ‘celebrities’ - William Daniell 1814, (accurate sketches of early steamers), John Keats 1818, Felix Mendelssohn 1829, Sir Walter Scott, William Turner 1831, Wordsworth 1832, Sir Robert Peel, Queen Victoria 1847, Alfred, Lord Tennyson 1853 and Jules Verne 1859. All travelled by steamer and wrote accounts or based books and music on their travels to the west coast of Scotland, which in turn encouraged yet more visitors.



Another date to note - the **Comet** may not have been the very first west coast steamer. On the 10th June 1819, the paddle steamer the **Dumbarton Castle** left Glasgow and sailed up the west coast, through the Pentland Firth and down the east coast to Leith. An eight day, one off trip. However, the fact stands, the **Comet**, on the 26th August 1819 was the first to establish a regular time-table service 'up and doon' the North West coast of Scotland!

RESEARCH

As Chair of Tobermory Harbour Association, I have been long fascinated by the development of the Scottish coastal harbour towns prior to 1850. Fascinated, by the impact that the paddle steamers had when working to a time table. This is a period, long before photography and long before David MacBrayne laid claim to the Highlands and Islands, according to a local saying -

‘Unto the Lord belongs the Earth
And all that it contains
Except the Kyles and Western Isles
For they belong to MacBraynes’

Henry Bell and his paddle steamers the **Comets** are well documented in printed books, printed papers and on line. Unfortunately, the actual date of the very first services to Oban, Fort William and Tobermory varied slightly from book to book. Recent scans of provincial newspapers, searchable online by words, dates and adverts, made the identification of this important date possible. My research through many adverts and articles confirmed the changes on the North West of Scotland, due to the extremely rapid expansion and progression of steam powered boats.

The 26th August 2019 is the two hundredth anniversary of the first regular steamer service and deserves to be remembered and celebrated by all!

THANKS TO

Steamers at Oban pier - many thanks to the late Graham Ellis and son Gavin Ellis.

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The Editor of the Inverness Courier
Inverness Courier - <https://www.inverness-courier.co.uk/>

Map of 'Steamer routes to Tobermory' - KFT Ltd and <https://tobermoryharbour.co.uk>

FURTHER READING AND INFORMATION ON EARLY PADDLE STEAMERS

Early Clyde Steamships - <https://www.dalmandan.com/?p=1135>

Paddle Steamer information - <http://www.paddlesteamers.info>

Paddle Steamer information - <https://www.clydeships.co.uk/search.php>
Select Paddle steamer from the Propulsion Type drop down list to search for information on all the early paddle steamers.

Inverarnan Canal - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aCSFpxy-y8g>

Brian Swinbanks with thanks to Jean Whittaker at Tobermory Museum and Professor Graham Lappin at dalmandan.com

