

DORNOCH HERITAGE TRAIL

1. Dornoch, so far as is known, had its origins as a Christian settlement in the sixth century. It is fitting therefore that our Heritage Trail should begin in Dornoch Cathedral. The building of the cathedral began under Gilbert, Bishop of Caithness, about 1224. Its aisles and nave were almost wholly destroyed in a clan feud in 1570. In the 18th century it suffered from neglect but the restoration work of 1835-37 and the loving care exercised on the fabric since then have restored the building to the fine edifice you see today.

(More detail can be found in the Guide which is on sale within).

2. A few yards from the cathedral's south door we pass through a wrought iron gate which bears the arms of the burgh. Keep right and follow the wall to its eastern extremity where a plaque indicates the probable site of St Barr's 6th century chapel.
3. Retrace your steps to the gravel path. As you walk to the northern exit from the churchyard, note on your right the "Plaiden Ell", the standard 38 inch cloth measurement of former days.
4. We are now standing on the site of the old market place marked by the Mercat Cross. Here, according to Sir Robert Gordon, Sutherland's 17th Century historian:

"St Barr his fayre was kept in former tymes the twentie fyfth day of September".

The lane across the road used to be known as "Dog Street". Shepherds and crofters would leave their dogs there while attending the market. A young officer was executed here in 1654. He had killed a brother officer in a duel.

5. Eastward about a hundred yards is the Carnegie Free Library gifted to the burgh in 1906 by Andrew Carnegie. The building now houses the library and Sutherland District Council Chambers.

Across the road from the library you will notice the arch of an old bridge built in 1800. This bridge would have been used by the old stage-coaches en route to the stables which lie up Schoolhill opposite the Episcopal Church. A bridge stood on this site as far back as 1562 and perhaps earlier.

6. Looking east from the bridge you will see a fine old house, "St Michael's". If you walk a few yards up Schoolhill you will see an arch in the stone work of the south wall of St Michael's. This wall is, according to Hector Mackay a former town clerk of the Royal Burgh, part of "one of the Cathedral's original manses", probably the Precentor's manse, whose farm, Achinchanter, lay to the north.
7. Return to Station Road and walk north to Station Square the one-time site of Dornoch Light Railway station. From here in former days 190 - 1960 a train ran to the main line some 7½ miles to the north. The story of this railway is told in an article in "The Scots Magazine", June 1983. The article was written by the Cathedral minister, Rev. James Simpson.
8. Some fifty yards north of the old station waiting room, now an antique shop, stands a massive stone marked "St Michael's Well". It was placed there by the Sutherland Estates factor, George Gunn, who lived at Rhives near Golspie. The Reform Act of 1832 decreed that voters in the Royal Burgh had to live within seven miles of St Michael's Well. The actual well lay just beyond the accepted distance. Nothing daunted Mr Gunn had the stone you are now looking at hewn, inscribed and erected here - near enough to Rhives to let Mr Gunn keep his vote!