

LOCH SHIN - RIVER CASSLEY CIRCUIT

Article: Graham Warren



Taking to the river on the morning of Day 3, just below Duchally Lodge.

Three years ago, whilst wading, lining and paddling down the Oykel from Inverkirkaig to Bonar Bridge, we passed the mouth of a fine looking river flowing in from the north. That river turned out to be the Cassley. It rises up on Ben More Assynt and tumbles the twenty or so miles down to the Oykel, losing 260m of elevation in the process. The river Cassley (at least this Anglicised version of the name) doesn't sound very Scottish, but it is every bit a highland stream, a dyed-in-the-tartan salmon river, famed in fishing circles. Seeing this river sowed the seed for this autumn's trip, a circuit up Loch Shin, portaging across to the Cassley then returning down this. Up on top of the mountain, near the source of the river, is a tiny wonderland of connected lochans; the Fionn Lochs and Gorm Loch Mor. This looks an interesting place to explore and a good base for climbing one of the surrounding peaks.

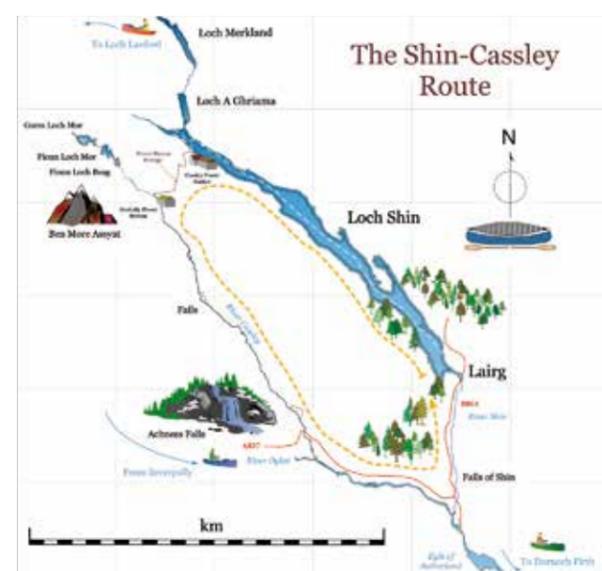
White water paddlers are drawn to the Cassley for its two sections of waterfalls. The Scottish White Water Guide describes it as a beautiful white water river, but suggests that most paddlers will want to drive between the two falls to avoid the long intervening sections of "lower grade" water. But it was precisely these sections — solving the intricacies of travelling them — that appealed to us. We wanted to lose ourselves in the "delight of tumbling rapids, foaming runs and deep

pools" as a local guidebook says, not motor on by.

Other commitments meant that we were not able to make our usual October slot. We would have to go in the second week of November, accepting the extra challenges of shorter days and even less predictable weather that this would entail. In fact, the weather wasn't unpredictable— it was predicted to snow.

We always hotly debate whether or not to take a trolley. We don't want to slip into trolley-dependency and so miss out on the magnificent trips where they will not function. The upper reaches of the Cassley looked like a definite no-trolley zone on Google Earth, but to finish this trip we certainly favoured an 8-mile trolley rather than a 24 mile, 3-trip portage up the road section taking us back to Lairg. Also, there was a useful-looking road between the Loch Shin and River Cassley (Duchally) power stations, which would make an easy trolley link if we needed it. So a trolley was somewhat reluctantly added to our gear list.

A canoe trip in the dark days of November, with a poor weather forecast can be as much an exercise in remaining positive as it is about paddling. The mountain tops were already ominously white as we motored up the A9. There was definitely a November chill in the air and the illuminated roadside signs were doing their best to get us to turn back with their "Yellow Snow Warning".



Loch Shin, a 17-mile ribbon across Sutherland, long enough to have different weather at either end.



Up amongst the snow and nearing the summit on the Power Station Road.

We decided to stop for the night at the Falls of Shin. It was around 7pm and dark enough to make you think your eyes had stopped working. The last of the visitors had long since gone, leaving empty expanses of nicely mown grass for our exclusive use. The roar of the falls was a constant reminder of what might be in store for us. Adventure was in the air.

The first leg of our journey was northwest up Loch Shin. This is a big loch, Scotland's fifth longest, covering around half the span of the entire country from Loch Laxford on the west coast to the Kyle of Sutherland on the east. It looks good on the map, but gets short shrift in the Scottish Canoe Touring guide. The authors say they have tried hard to find redeeming features, but failed to find any. Nothing. The loch just goes on and on through drab, undulating country. In short, they pronounce it deadly dull and boring. As if this wasn't enough, they throw in the fact that Loch Shin has unreasonable numbers of paddlers' two legendary foes, midges and anglers.

DAY 1

The easiest put-in was a few miles up the loch from Lairg, but we decided not to use this because it left too much open water until the end of the trip. If the wind changed to a westerly and reached terminal velocity, we could be stranded. Instead we started from a lay-by near Lairg, a good decision as it turned out. We had chosen our starting point on the circuit on the basis of the forecasted tail-wind, which turned

up right on time to greet us. As we set out on the loch, the snow was well up out of the way, confined to the highest summits.

Contrary to the Touring Guide, we found we were enjoying ourselves. Perhaps there are two Loch Shins. The one we were on was definitely not boring, but pleasant, airy and with the definite aura of a major piece of water in the very far north, and a major cross-country route. This got us thinking about why would you find a piece of water boring. Is paddling itself of little merit, just a means to get into the scenery? If so, why not walk? Maybe we haven't yet realised that we shouldn't be enjoying paddling for its own sake.

We continued, surfing on the growing waves, entertaining ourselves by really getting into the spirit of the Canoe Touring Guide's disparaging view of our loch. "Look at that bird. Plain black. How monotonous." "Not more mountains; how tedious." When the Lairg dam was built, the water level rose 11 metres and the already long loch extended even further. We imagined the Canoe Touring Guide writers' reaction to the loch getting even longer.

3.30pm: the light was fading. The lochside here was low and windswept with no obvious flat areas for our tents. It was getting darker, colder and more austere by the minute. Time to work hard at being positive. A firebreak in the forest, looked more promising, even though in our experience firebreaks rarely give ground smooth enough and dry enough for comfortable camping. However, when we got close



Hiding from the wind.



Welcome shelter at firebreak camp.



"Y'll nae make it!"

Our first view of the Cassley snaking out of the snows. This isn't going to be easy.



the ground was surprisingly smooth. What's more, when you stood still water didn't ooze up around your feet. At least not straight away. Luxury.

The stirring treetops in the night told us that the wind was getting up. It started to rain. It was cold enough that rain here would be snow on the tops, so we were nervous about what the view from the tent doors in the morning would reveal.

DAY 2

The snow level had indeed descended by morning. The mountains had been transformed in the night from majestic to sulky and sinister. We figured that the high lochans, and much of the portage route to get to them, would now be in the snow. This route option suddenly seemed somehow less appealing than it had in front of the fire at home. After very little discussion we opted for the alternative, the trolley route along the power station road leading over the mountain to Cassley Glen.

We set off and paddled under a rather threatening grey sky to the end of the loch where the cross-Scotland route comes in from Loch A Ghriama. Our original portage route to the high country disappeared up into the snow. We paddled on by. We landed instead at a rather desolate beach by the power station, surrounded by inscrutable concrete installations, pipework and fences. Access to the road was easy however, and we trolleyed up smooth tarmac, heading ever closer to the snow. At one point an electricity van appeared coming towards us down the road. The driver was friendly and more than willing to chat, this probably being more appetising than getting out into the snow and fettling powerlines. He told us that the road up ahead was snowed right over, and very slippery, and also that the Cassley may not have enough water to be canoeable, and that we had a long walk in front of us. He wasn't helping.

We continued, soon reaching the first flecks of snow, then patches, then a complete covering. We had hiked all the way up to winter on this barren, treeless mountain. Trekking through the snow wasn't exactly what we'd had in mind, but to be fair, the thought of climbing aboard the canoe and tobogganing down the far side of the hill did hold a certain appeal. As it happened the snow was melting rapidly and our passage through was almost clear.

They say you always remember what you were doing when you first learn of a catastrophe. We were standing in a snowdrift on the top of a mountain. Our feeling of being beyond the last outpost of civilisation had just been compromised by coming across a phone mast on the top of the hill. This prompted Andrew to phone home, which is how we received the result of the presidential election in the U.S. We hurried to get back into the relative safety of the wilderness.

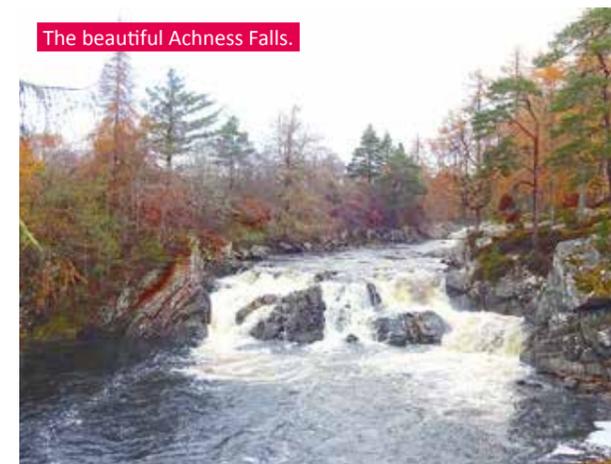
Wheeling down the other side of the hill gave us our first glimpse of the Cassley. First impression: pretty, not at all boring, but lacking one of the major ingredients of a river. Perhaps descriptions we had read of people canoeing the Cassley were from a time before the water was diverted to the hydro? But



Eventually we were treated to longer sections of paddling.



Dawn at our Island Camp with the sun doing a fine impression of a meteor.



The beautiful Achness Falls.



The Cassley above our put-in on day 3.



Drumlin Valley.



Wading.

Dusk overtook us before the river became paddleable. Again, smooth, not-too-wet pitches were not hard to find and we set up camp just below the track, overlooking a little set of falls. The sky was clearing and it was getting colder. We had covered about 7 miles since Loch Shin.

DAY 3

We awoke to a landscape much improved by a blue sky, bright sunshine and brilliant snow-capped peaks. We were back amongst the trees, at the height of their autumn colours. Not hard to be positive this morning.

A short carry of about 600 metres brought us to the start of more promising looking water just beyond Duchally Lodge. There were clearly still lots of rocks around, though. A combination of the low November sun in our eyes and a dark algal covering, meant that the first you knew of the rocks was the crunch as you hit them. It was a time to savour a day of in-river entertainment, literally immersing ourselves in the intricacies of downstream wading and lining, reading the river, choosing the best line.

Just before lunchtime, it was clear that we were approaching a gorge; the river dropped out of sight, we could see tree tops at eye level, the roar of water intensified and the riverbanks reared up and closed in. The river curved rightwards out of sight, hiding

its secrets. Another of those exciting bits. Decisions: which side to portage; do we follow the river or is the terrain easier further back; where can we get back down to the water again? With the packs, we explored a high path that came uncomfortably close to the edge of the gorge, right above the most dramatic part of the falls. In the worst possible place, Andrew fell, snatched over by the weight of his pack. I leapt forward to grab an ankle, but fortunately didn't need to complete the action because after bouncing once Andrew came to a halt just short of the edge.

Wading with the canoe between and around the generous helping of rocks was quite complex. We were in and out of the canoe so much that it started to fill with water, so we cut some logs to place across the bottom of the boat to keep the packs high and dry.

We made four miles that day, got to know every rock in the river personally, and finally limped up onto a little island to camp, with a twisted ankle and bruised knee. After eating, we took a turn around the island for our evening walk. Two hundred yards later we were back at the tents. Ours was a small world.

DAY 4

Dawn at the Island Camp was the very essence of November-ness. The air had almost as high-a moisture content as the river. The sun struggled to rise through the mist. We got up with the light at 7am, breath steaming, happy to escape from the wet tents. A few minutes later they suddenly froze.



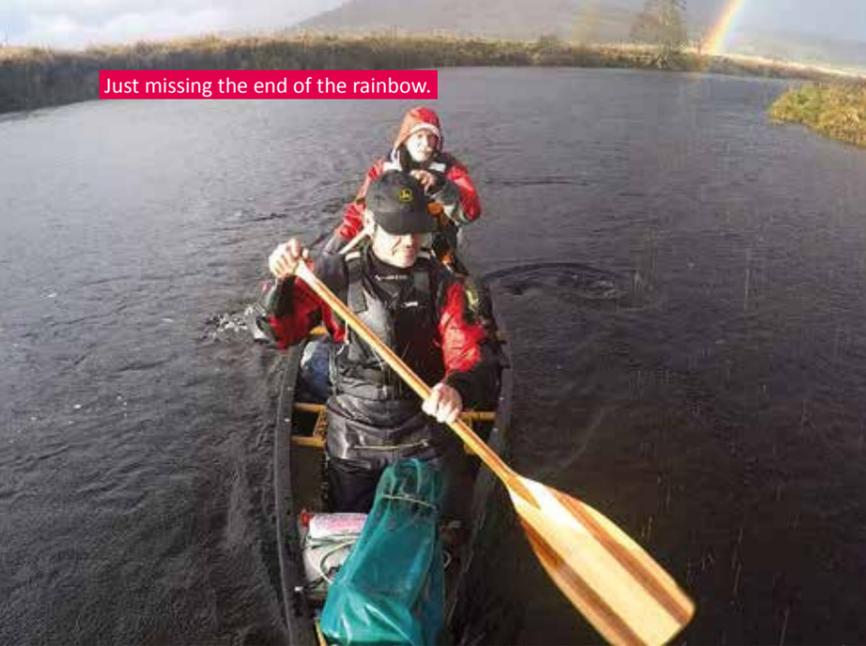
Puncture: the distance to paddleable water suddenly seemed much greater.



Mist over the Cassley.

in contrast to the snowfields all around us, Cassley Glen looked a green and pleasant land. It was still autumn down there. We stopped for lunch just below the holding pool for water queuing for the rollercoaster ride down the tunnel to Loch Shin. It was a pretty spot, and the river, although still choked with rocks, seemed to be increasing in size. Things were at last progressing quite nicely — but that was all about to change.

Like an ominous change in the weather, the track surface turned from smooth tarmac to Estate Rubble. The trolley began to struggle visibly. It juddered, bounced and skidded, and clearly didn't like it. The bouldery juddering went on and on. Then, suddenly, we heard that most awful of all sounds; worse than the eruptive hydro inflow on Loch Laggan, worse than the wind getting up near dawn, worse even than an angry hail from a ghillie — we heard the malignant hiss of a puncture. Easy Street had suddenly come to an end. We both stood in silence and just looked. We judged that we were at least a couple of miles from paddleable water, maybe a whole lot further. There are a few options in this situation; the obvious one, a puncture repair outfit, was ruled out because we didn't have one. But we did have something far better — a complete contempt for the foibles of trolleys. We simply picked the canoe up, trolley still strapped on, and flipped it up into an overhead carry, wheels sticking out like a pair of joke Mickey Mouse ears.



Just missing the end of the rainbow.



The camp amidst the spruces and pines at Achness Falls.



The lower Cassley became increasingly exciting.

We swung out into the hastening current of the Cassley, confident of more paddling today. After the slow progress of the previous day, we seemed to be rocketing along down bouncy rapids, round wide bends and through deep pools. We still encountered many rocky sections and discovered that the Cassley has a similar geology to the nearby Oykel; a riverbed to be of smooth, slip-slidey slabs set at an angle of around 45 degrees. Your feet were forever sliding away from you, making for very hard going. We were intensely aware of the danger of foot entrapment and proceeded with great care, but falls were frequent.

Late in the day we approached the scenic highlight of the river, the famous Achness Falls. These are much more impressive than the Falls of Shin, especially now with beautiful sprays of autumn foliage competing for scenic grandeur with the cascades of white water. Next to the river at the bottom of the falls is a graveyard. To those steeped in canoe history, the gravestones here were very reminiscent of the crosses that adorned the banks of dangerous rapids back in the voyageur days. The atmosphere of the place was such that you could almost hear voyageur songs echoing down between the rocky walls.

We found a good campsite on the portage around the falls, on a deep bed of moss and spruce needles in a stand of tall trees. The trees were, for once, in convenient places for tarping, so we soon had a ridgeline stretched out and a simple up-and-over tarp set up to keep out the wind.

DAY 5

In the morning the sky was troubled, very dark towards the horizon, and tinged with the purple of winter. Today was not going to stay dry. We put in a couple of hundred metres below the falls, within sight of the road bridge at Rosehall.

There were now a lot more runnable rapids but also numerous accursed fishing weirs which needed inspecting. One minute the rain teemed down, the next the sun blazed out; one rapid led into another, then another.

The river now widened out rapidly and before long we pulled out into familiar ground on the Oykel, leading to the Kyle of Sutherland. Over the final seven easy miles we began to experience that warm inner glow of successfully completing another circuit, an idea on the map brought to reality.

We finished with a rather awkward exit at the point nearest the main road at Inveran. It was here that we had intended to trolley our gear back up to Lairg, but with the trolley out of action we cached the gear in the trees and set off to walk, in the dark now, the eight miles back to the car. Liberated, joyfully free from our heavy packs, and wrapped in a blanket of darkness, we savoured the alternative landscape of night.

Not much further now. We were very glad that we had set out from the near end of Loch Shin, rather than from the easier access point higher up the loch, otherwise we would have been faced with several miles more.

The Shin-Cassley route is about 48 miles in total. The upper section of the river was quite hard going in places at the water levels we encountered, but the overall route is one of great variety and interest. The circuit takes you from wide-open water where you paddle to the horizon, over heathery mountain tops and then down to the intimate runs and pools as the Glen closes in. Travelling on a river teeming with salmon, with intense autumn colours and the sound of major falls drifting up the valley made the trip especially memorable.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Graham Warren runs Moosehead Canoes (www.mooseheadcanoes.co.uk), a Derbyshire-based business specialising in wood-canvas canoes and paddlemaking. Graham is author of *Canoe Paddles: a complete guide to making your own*, and has recently set up 'Scottish Canoe Routes' (www.scottishcanoeroutes.info) which gives information on trips in Scotland of the traditional paddle and portage style.

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