

# **WALKING THE GALLOWAY HILLS**

### About the Author



Ronald Turnbull was born in St Andrews, Scotland, into an energetic fellwalking family. His grandfather was a president of the Scottish Mountaineering Club, and a more remote ancestor was distinguished as only the second climbing fatality in Snowdonia. Having lived in Dumfries & Galloway for the last 40 years, he has named the Merrick as his favourite hill (although Bidean nam Bian and Great Gable also get a look-in) and now relishes the chance to write up the Galloway Hills in the detail that they deserve.

In 1995, Ronald won the Fell Runners Association's Long Distance Trophy for a non-stop run over all the 2000ft hills of southern Scotland. He has made 21 different coast-to-coast crossings of the UK, and has slept out, in bivvybag rather than tent, on more than 90 UK summits. Outside the UK, he likes hot, rocky areas of Europe, ideally with beaches and cheap aeroplanes. Recent trips have included the Tour of Monte Rosa, and Utah's Canyonlands. He has also started trying to understand the geology of what he's been walking and climbing on for so long.

Most of Ronald's walking, and writing, takes place in the nearby Lake District and in the Scottish Highlands. His recent books include *The Book of the Bivvy*, and walking/scrambling guides *Loch Lomond and the Trossachs*, *The Cairngorms* and *Ben Nevis and Glen Coe*, as well as *Three Peaks, Ten Tors* – a slightly squint-eyed look at various UK challenge walks. He has nine times won Outdoor Writers and Photographers Guild Awards for Excellence for his guidebooks, outdoor books (including *The Book of the Bivvy*) and magazine articles. He writes frequently in *Lakeland Walker*, *Trail* and *The Great Outdoors (TGO)*. His current, hopelessly ambitious, project is to avoid completing the Munros for at least another 20 years.

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*Trossachs*  
*Walking the Jurassic Coast*  
*Walking the Southern Upland Way*  
*(revised update, 2018)*

## WALKING THE GALLOWAY HILLS

35 WILD MOUNTAIN WALKS INCLUDING THE  
MERRICK

by Ronald Turnbull

**CICERONE**

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*This book is dedicated with thanks to Andy Priestman  
and his family, who first led me into the Galloway Hills.*

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*Front cover:* Reaching the summit of Mullwarchar above Loch Enoch (Route 16)

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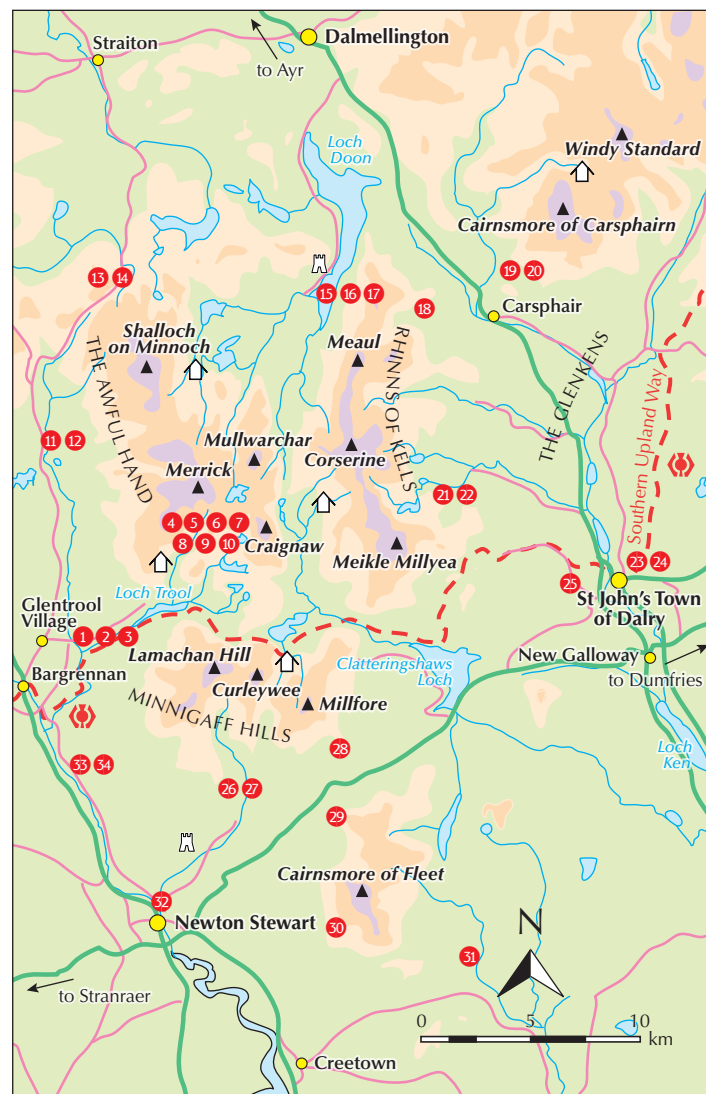
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**Route symbols on OS map extracts**  
(for OS legend see printed OS maps)

|   |                   |   |                                |
|---|-------------------|---|--------------------------------|
|   | route             |   | start/finish point             |
|  | alternative route |  | start point                    |
|  | route direction   |  | finish point                   |
|   |                   |  | alternative start/finish point |

GPX files for all routes can be downloaded free at [www.cicerone.co.uk/1010/GPX](http://www.cicerone.co.uk/1010/GPX).



## INTRODUCTION

In the wilds of Galloway that look towards Ayrshire, up by the springs of Doon and Dee, there lies a wide country of surpassing wildness, whither resorted all the evil gypsies of the hill – red-handed men, outlaws and aliens of all this realm of well-affected men.

*SR Crockett, The Raiders*

I fixed on Galloway as the best place to go

*John Buchan, The Thirty-Nine Steps*

So maybe you're not a bandit or a red-handed man or lass. Maybe you aren't on the run from a gang of unseemly foreigners in the dark days before World War I, or Aymer de Valence and the English army in 1307. Even so, the Galloway Hills – the Galloway Highlands, as they used to be called – have a lot to offer to the more rugged sort of hillgoer. There are the grey

boulders, the black peaty bog, the tussocks of grass. There are great slabs of naked granite, and two dozen sparkling lochs and lochans; long grassy ridges, and intricate wee hills like Craignaw and Curleywee.

The Galloway Hills are small, but special. They stretch just 20km (15 miles) from west to east, and 40km (25 miles) north to south – almost as

small as Snowdonia. Within that area – much of it pathless – Galloway has 23 summits over 2000ft, including four Corbetts (2500-footers).

Most of the summits line themselves into the three ridges around the edge. The Minnigaffs, the Rhinns of Kells and the Range of the Awful Hand give enjoyable grassy going and great views. But what those views are of – that's the bit in the middle. It's the bit where the wild goats go, and the legendary brigands of the untamed 17th century, and the grim-faced guerrilla warriors of Robert the Bruce.

If you like your wild landscape really wild... If you like your lakes to have whooper swans in the middle and no ice-cream vans around the edge... If you like to have one foot on bare rock and the other one deep in a peat bog... If you like your granite with goats on... Then Galloway is the place to go.

### HARSHNESS AND HEATHER

The high ground of Galloway is rugged, remote, and rather different from anywhere you've been before. And it's wonderful country. However, those grassy ridgelines and that granite heartland do come at a cost. Much of the lower ground is unpathed, ungrazed, and poorly drained. Rather a lot of it is planted with dreary Sitka spruce. Much of the open moorland below the 300m level is heather, burnt down for grouse or luxuriating to the level of the hillwalker's thighs. Other low ground is tussocky grass, which, in August, can flourish almost as deep as the heather, with wet peaty holes between the tufts. Forest rides – the strips of rough grass between plantation blocks – sometimes have quad-bike wheelmarks but more often are the worst of grassy tussocks. Where drainage breaks down, there will be occasional wee peaty swamps.

### GALLOWAY AND ITS HILLS

The ancient realm of Galloway stretches from the River Nith and Dumfries all the way down to Scotland's southwest corner at the Mull of Galloway. This includes many rounded, grassy hills that can be called 'ordinary Southern Uplands'. The name Galloway Hills, or Galloway Highlands, is reserved for the highest part of this hill ground: the self-contained and rocky patch between the River Minnoch and the Glenkens valley, stretching southwards to Cairnsmore of Fleet. Mostly contained within Dumfries & Galloway Region, at Loch Doon it runs down into Ayrshire.

This book covers these Galloway Hills, along with (on the eastern side of the Glenkens valley) Cairnsmore of Carsphairn, which is one of Galloway's four Corbetts (2500-footers) and shares the area's distinctive granite rocks.



*Minnigaff Hills from Benyellary (Route 5)*



Mental preparedness is everything. It helps to know in advance that the wonderful rocky ridgeline of Hoodens Hill (Route 16) must be paid for at day's end with a lot of forest road and a few hundred metres of nasty forest rides. So each walk is graded for harshness, as below.

Approaches from Loch Trool are not only very beautiful but also reasonably easy going. Elsewhere, some small paths are starting to form, and where these do exist (Shalloch from the north, Corserine from the east) I have taken advantage of them.

Where a route is graded as 4 or 5, this applies to its most demanding section, usually a short stretch on the approach or the walk-out. A high level of harshness is only justified where the main part of the walk is of especial excellence!

### Harshness grading

- 1 Undemanding: smooth, well-surfaced and well-drained paths
- 2 Pleasant: rough hill paths, smooth grassy hilltops and ridges
- 3 Challenging: coarse grassland, bare granite slabs, steep stony paths
- 4 Hard: pathless heather, boggy coarse grassland, seriously steep slopes
- 5 Nasty: deep heather, deep grassy tussocks, bogs

### GEOLOGY OF THE GALLOWAY HILLS

About 400 million years ago, what would eventually be called Scotland crunched into what would end up as England. On either side, the crumpled-up rocks formed the hill zones of today: the Highlands and the Lake District respectively. In between the two, deep-ocean sludges were raised and crumpled like a trodden-on tube of toothpaste. The crumpled sludges made a rock called greywacke; their hill range, in the squash zone between England and Scotland, is the Southern Uplands.

But Galloway got a hit of something different. As one continent burrowed underneath the other, underground heat melted the bedrock in great blobs of magma. These worked their way upwards, cooled and congealed into pale-grey, crystalline granite. One such lump of granite forms the distinctive heartland of the Galloways.

The granite, as it arrives, cooks and alters the surrounding greywacke rocks – this altered rock is called hornfels. And it's a bit like Goldilocks and the porridge. Far away, the granite heat has no effect. Right up against the granite, the cookery downgrades the greywacke into something crumbly. But in between, at a couple of kilometres out from the magma chamber, the greywacke gets hardened and improved.

Here in Galloway, the hornfels is tougher than the granite itself. And



*Grey Man of the Merrick (Route 6)*



so, after erosion, the result is a ring of tough rocks – the Minnigaffs, the Rhinns of Kells and the Awful Hand – right around the granite hills of the Dungeon range in the middle. A ring of this sort, around a central granite nipple, is called a metamorphic areole. (The coastal hills of Screel and Bengairn, not included in this book, show the same formation in miniature.)

### Greywacke

The unaltered greywacke rock is seen around the outer rim of the hills. It's a compact and featureless grey sandstone. The dull exterior conceals an exciting origin. In the deep ocean trench, nothing much happens for tens of thousands of years. But, thousands of metres above, mud and silt are slowly building up on the continental shelf. All of a sudden, this all slides down in an underwater avalanche, travelling at 100km/hr and sweeping away any trivial

obstructions like undersea telephone cables.

Each mudslide becomes a single thick bed of greywacke. Where you can see them, the beds are usually standing on end or even upside down – the result of the Scotland–England collision that squashed and raised them. Being made of mud, the greywacke can be smooth and quite slippery, especially when wet.

### Hornfels

The hardened and altered hornfels rocks, making the three hill ridges around the rim, are grey like the greywacke they started off as, but solid and knobbly. The heat of the arriving granite has allowed the original greywacke to partly crystallise. This welds it all together, and the crystal corners make for a rough and grippy rock. So the hornfels rocks can give satisfying scrambling.

### Granite

Granite cools slowly, deep underground in big lumps called plutons. As the pluton cools, it shrinks, cracking into big, regular blocks. The main shrinkage cracks are parallel with the top or side surfaces of the underground pluton. This means that granite at the top breaks into smooth, near-level slabs – as seen and walked on at Craignaw.

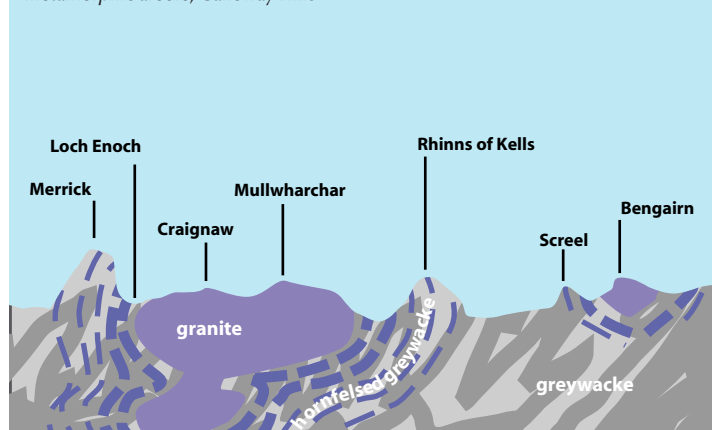
Because granite cools oh-so-slowly, it has time to form visible crystals several millimetres across. The crystals are of three sorts: tough, glassy quartz; white or grey feldspar; and a dark iron-rich mineral. The dark minerals and the feldspar rot away in the wind and rain, leaving the sharp-edged quartz standing proud to give a superbly grippy surface. This also results in rounding of

the corners, giving a lack of actual handholds to climb with, but nicely rounded boulders decorating the hillsides. Meanwhile, the eroded-out quartz crystals form the pale, gleaming beaches of Loch Neldricken and Loch Enoch. It's a fair summary to say that what makes Galloway Galloway is the granite.

### The ice

Finally came the ice ages, to give the hills their shapes of today. A deep ice cap was centred on Mullwharchar. Granite boulders from Mullwharchar and Craignaw, carried outwards by the ice, are seen on the surrounding ridges, and there's an obvious contrast where they've come to rest on the rather different hornfels rock. Bruce's Stone itself is one such.

Metamorphic areole, Galloway Hills





## WILDLIFE AND WET

Interpretation boards at Cairnsmore of Fleet describe it as a high-altitude granite bog of international importance. That judgement is a little unkind – much of the ground is rock rather than bog. But these fairly low hills, with their mild, damp climate, do have a green and vigorous plant growth and the wildlife to match.

Around the southern edges of the range, the natural cover is Atlantic oakwood. Chunks of this lovely woodland remain, and these are being slowly infilled with the aim of creating a continuous natural wood right up the Cree valley to Glen Trool. These woods are at their best in late spring, with bluebells and other wildflowers. They are still a stronghold for the native red squirrel – but the invasive grey crossed the River Nith in 2018 and is likely to spread westwards, eliminating the red as it arrives. Roe deer also roam in these woodlands; your best chance of seeing them is if you're the first along a forest track very early in the morning.

Red kites were reintroduced into the Glenkens valley in 2001. They are now a common sight anywhere in Galloway, and at the feeding station at Belymack, near Laurieston, you can see a dozen at once. The birds are general scavengers rather than hunting hawks. Roughly buzzard-sized but more slender, they can be recognised by their stubby-forked tails.

Among other raptors, buzzards are common, and peregrine,

goshawk, sparrowhawk and merlin can sometimes be seen. Hen harriers appear to be extinct in this area, but a returning short-eared owl was spotted by the Galloway ranger in 2018 – unlike other owls, these fly and hunt by daylight. Up to three pairs of golden eagles nest, or have nested, in the Galloway Hills. The forlorn eagle that tried to inhabit the Lake District originated in Galloway. But if you're not sure what you've seen, then it was a buzzard – 99 per cent of reported eagle sightings are buzzards. If you're going 'What the heck is that? It's blooming huge!' – yes, that's an eagle.

In the granite heartland, the distinctive wildlife is the Galloway herd of wild goats. Technically, these are merely feral, as they're descended from domestic goats that have leapt over fences to freedom from the Bronze Age onwards. They have evolved wild, shaggy coats to withstand the Galloway rain. They're less often spotted than formerly, since some estate owners have started issuing hunting permits against them. However, some will normally be seen at the Wild Goat Park on the A712 at Talnotry, as this is their winter feeding station.

Red deer also roam the Galloway Hills. Your best chance of spotting them is at the Red Deer Range near Talnotry, or else on this book's less-used routes, in the unvisited corries on the outside of the three high ridges. I've met them on the southern flanks of the Minnigaffs and the western ones of the Awful Hand.



SECTION 1: GLEN TROOL

Glen Trool, *Gleann an t-Sruthail*, is the Glen Of The Running Streams. It could equally well have been the Glen Of The Oakwoods, or the Glen Of The Rocky Slopes. But if you go along with the Gaelic tradition of giving humdrum names to the loveliest of places, it would have to be the Glen With The Loch In It. You walk under the trees from the road-end car parks to the nearby Bruce's Stone to find yourself high above the water in one of the most stunning spots in southern Scotland.

Already behind you at that point are long but gentle walks through the woodlands and along the peaty rivers (the linked Routes 1 and 2). An even better one (Route 3) leads right around the loch. And the Southern Upland Way's dirt track heads out around the base of the Minnigaff range. Meanwhile, beside you, a well-made path runs up onto southern Scotland's highest summit, the Merrick, at 843m – not that far under the Munro height of 3000ft. The route there (Route 5) is no mere uphill plod, but a swinging high-level ridgeline over Benyellary.

And yet, all this is just Galloway's gentler face. Across the loch, it's very obvious that Muldonoch is an altogether different sort of ground,

bristling with small rocky knolls. That hill, once you've found the hidden old pathway through its defending trees, makes the start of a route line (Route 9) that switches mood abruptly along the airy ridge of Lamachan Hill that rises behind.

And what you see over on Muldonoch is only the start of it. A rough, but very romantic, way leads steeply up onto Fell of Eschoncan (Route 4). Routes 6 and 7 lead in to Loch Enoch and Craignaw, the Galloway heartland of sparkling lochans, bare granite and occasional black peaty bits.

If you only come to these hills once, then you'll come to Glen Trool. But having come to Glen Trool, you'll surely be inspired to come to Galloway many times again. Or almost surely... One Aymer de Valence and his small army probably thought once was quite enough after being speared to death by Robert the Bruce all along the wooded lochside slopes.

So it's not surprising that Loch Trool is the standard start point for days in the Galloway Hills. Other entry points are available. But all things being equal, Glen Trool is the one to go for.

ROUTE 1

Water of Minnoch and Glen Trool

|                                 |   |
|---------------------------------|---|
| <b>Start/finish</b>             | River Minnoch near Clachaneasy (NX 362 749)   |
| <b>Alternative Start/finish</b> | Stroan Bridge (NX 372 785) or Bargrennan at River Cree (NX 349 764)   |
| <b>Distance</b>                 | 13km (8 miles)  |
| <b>Ascent</b>                   | 200m (600ft)  |
| <b>Harshness</b>                | 1   |
| <b>Approx time</b>              | 3hr 30min   |
| <b>Terrain</b>                  | Good paths  |
| <b>Highest point</b>            | White Cairn, 120m   |
| <b>Parking</b>                  | Turn off A714 at Clachaneasy, in 800 metres turn right, in another 800 metres reach a crossing forest track; parking 50 metres down track to left. More parking just across River Minnoch up short, unsigned track on left. |
| <b>Variants</b>                 | See Route 2   |

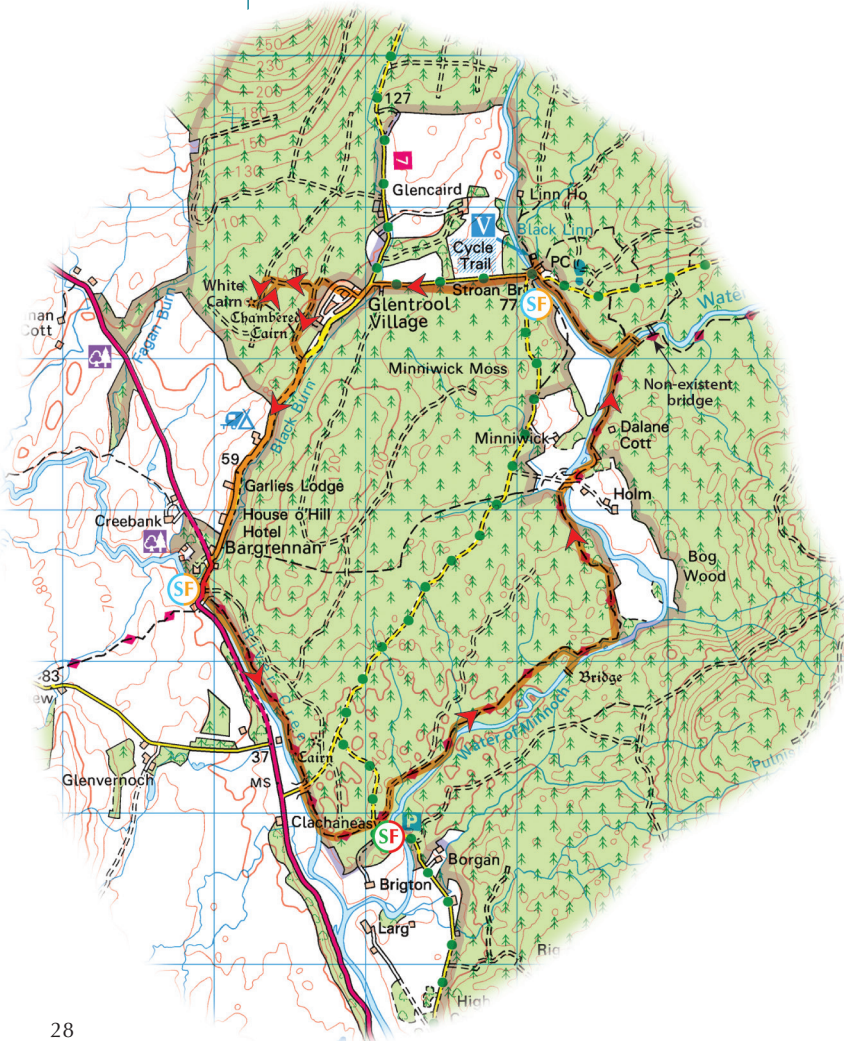
Galloway Hills are not, on the whole, an easy place to be. But this walk is. It uses a long stretch of the waymarked and maintained Southern Upland Way (SUW), alongside the three rivers of Cree, Minnoch and Trool, and through some ancient oakwoods. Halfway around, there's a snack stop at Stroan Bridge, and on the return there's the area's most impressive chambered cairn.

The only downside (apart from the absence of hills) is the 2km of road walking into Bargrennan. New for 2019 is a well made and very welcome roadside footpath between Glentrool village and the House o' Hill in Bargrennan.

From the parking pull-off, continue northeast along the track. After 800 metres, the waymarked SUW path forks off right. It runs near **Water of Minnoch** then in scrubby woodland and clearings in plantations, mostly felled but with some high stands of pine and spruce.

After 1km the path rejoins the river, which may be heard before seen. Here, a waymark in the bracken

indicates a left bend in the path, but take the smaller path ahead. It bends right, following the riverbank downstream to the **Roman Bridge**.



*Roman Bridge,  
Water of Minnoch*

The so-called **Roman Bridge** is actually a medieval packhorse bridge (or possibly even newer than that). It's a spectacular high arch above a narrows of the Water of Minnoch, and has survived storm spates that have demolished most of the more recent bridges at one time or another.

Return, and continue northeast on the main path, soon with a step stile over a wall dividing Brighton and Holm Woods. Through tall oak trees, the path reaches Holm Bridge.

Cross and turn left, on a faint path, through one small gate then with a fence on your left to another gate. Soon the path joins the riverbank and follows it upstream. A bench marks the point where Minnoch and Trool join. The path continues alongside **Water of Trool** for 400 metres to reach a noticeboard with path map and a high footbridge over Trool. ▶

Cross and turn left on a wide, well-made gravel path. It runs through woods near the Trool then joins the Minnoch to follow it upstream, with a waterfall just before arriving at the car park beside **Stroan Bridge** (alternative Start/finish).

Cross the rebuilt road bridge, then ignore a road on the left (a shortcut south back to Clachaneasy). In a few more steps, fork left on a path signed for Glentrool Village. This good path runs in woods which hide the nearby road. It rejoins the road briefly to cross a small

The upper footbridge shown on the map doesn't exist. For Route 2 to Caldons and Loch Trool, stay to the right of the river on the SUW.

At the time of writing,  
the village has no  
shop or facilities.

bridge, then heads back into woods, bending left to emerge at the edge of **Glentrool Village**.

A few steps ahead, bear up right into the village. ◀ As the street bends left, a narrow path on the right, with a white waymark, starts opposite a sign forbidding golf play. A small path through cleared forestry soon meets a rough track not marked on maps. Turn left on this, at once bending right to meet a clearer track. Follow this left for 50 metres, to a small path through bracken up on the right.

This runs to meet another forest track. Turn left for 200 metres, to a track T-junction in plantations. Turn left again, to an info board on the right where the **White Cairn chambered cairn** is just inside the plantations.

#### WHITE CAIRN

This is the best example you'll see of the Bargrennan type of chambered cairn, a Bronze Age structure that's probably a tomb. It consisted of a small tunnel passageway built of stone slabs, buried within a cairn or stonepile 15 metres wide. Here at the White Cairn, enough of the overlying stones have been removed (probably for wall building) to expose the tunnel structure and the passageway leading to it.

This is the best preserved of a dozen similar cairns in the neighbourhood, two more being seen on Routes 32 and 33.



*White Cairn chambered cairn*

Return to the track, and follow it back left for 20 metres. Now there's a path forking right at a waymark post. If the path is not overgrown, follow it through clear-fell northeast past a picnic table and down to rejoin the track on the arrival route. Follow this to the right, then the small path down right, to rejoin the track near the edge of Glentrool Village. Turn right, south. The track bends left to reach the two-lane road south of Glentrool Village. ▶

Turn right, along the quite busy road, but with a fine, wide footpath, first to its right and then to its left, as far as the **House o' Hill**. Bear left on the A714 across a small river. Pass across a large parking area (alternative Start/finish) to a SUW signpost just before the bridge over River Cree. Across a stile over the crash barrier, the path runs beside the river, then in the edge of pine plantations above. The going gets slightly soggy, then the path reaches the back road near **Clachaneasy**.

Cross slightly to the right, where the SUW path leads downstream in woods. After 400 metres, the main path turns up left away from the river – don't take a smaller path ahead through an old drystone wall. The path runs east, with the wall on its right to start with. It joins a track, which you follow to the right (no waymark) to reach another minor road. Cross to the parking pull-off at the walk start.

This track is not a designated trail, and could be closed for forest operations, in which case backtrack to Glentrool Village.