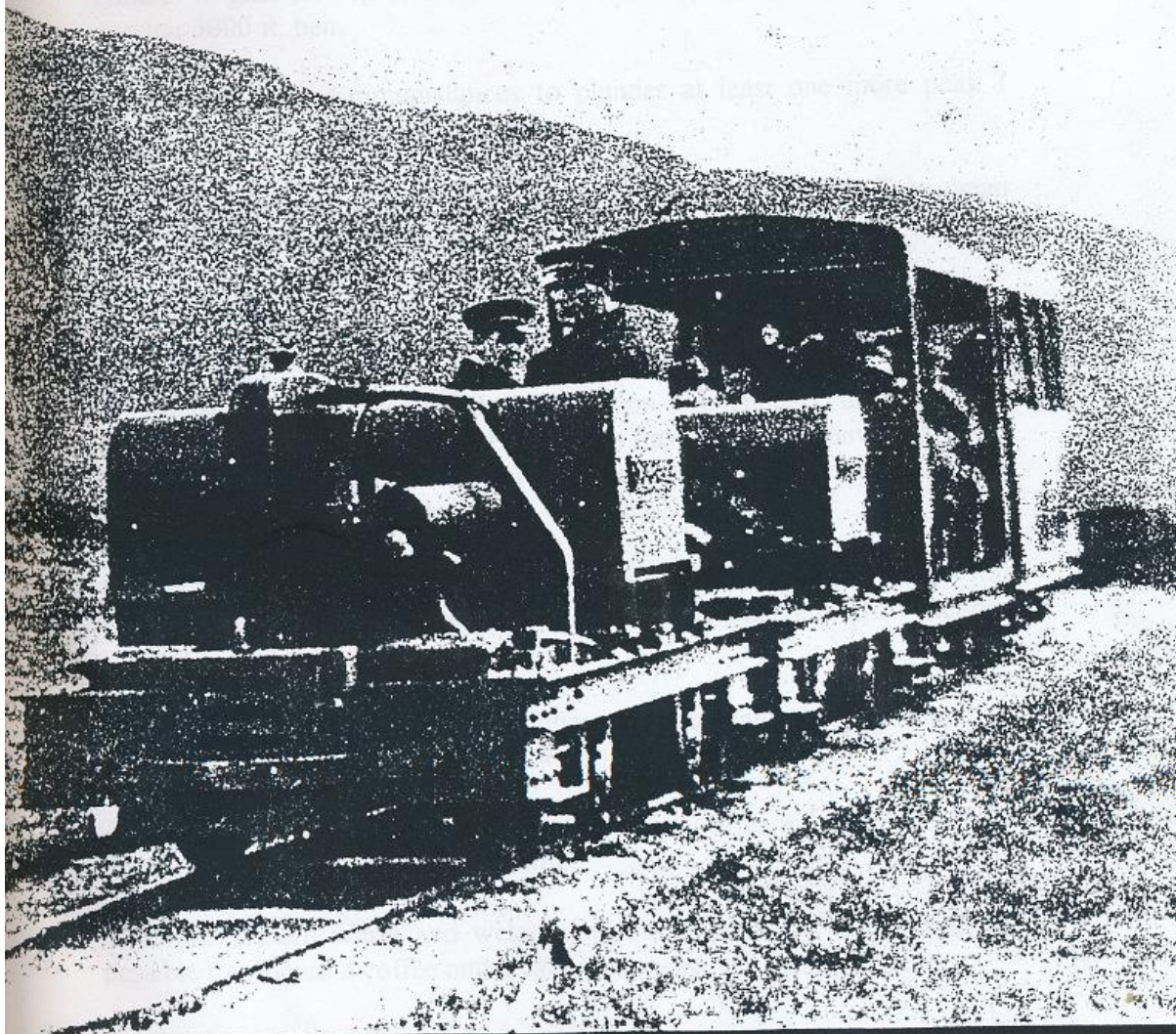


DALMUNZIE
RAILWAY

RODERICK DINGWALL

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DISCOVERING DALMUNZIE

Over the past five years I have been travelling to the west coast of Scotland to add to my tally of Munro's. So far I have climbed 104 including the infamous Inaccessible Pinnacle on Skye.

It was an incredible experience.

During the middle of my last visit, September 2001 the weather forecaster predicted heavy showers, strong winds and low clouds. An interesting combination I thought and not the ideal climatic conditions for a lone climber to gain the top of a wee bump let alone to bag the summit of yet another 3000 ft. ben.

In search of better circumstances to plunder at least one more peak I decided to make a dash to the east.

I looked to the map and my finger alighted with glee on Glas Talaichean a mountain situated in the Spittal O'Glenshee.

It seemed all I had to do was to follow the trackbed of an old railway for much of the route and I wouldn't get lost.

Following the directions to my destination I eventually drove up the access driveway to Dalmunzie House, this has now been converted into a Hotel and Sporting complex, its situation lies high up in the hills at 1,700 ft. (520 metres) above sea level.

On my arrival the turreted towers were shrouded in mist and a gale was whipping the tops of the pine tress shielding the imposing crow-stepped structure.

Despite all my efforts I had not managed to out flank the rain which by now had begun to pour down in buckets.

The time was 11 am. I was cold and hungry after my journey across Scotland to my intended starting point.

The hotel looked warm and welcoming and I wondered if it would be possible to procure a coffee and a cake to appease my aching appetite.



The two old carriages were hiding there as well, parked huddled together in a cobwebbed corner covered in a fine layer of dust.

A babies push chair and an odd assortment of metallic and plastic memorabilia was stacked between the coach seats. I was spellbound, it was as though the postcard scene had sprung to life.

It was magical to realise that the engine and coaches had survived the ravages of time and that they were still in company with each other after many many years.

Age had left its mark but had not deprived them of their dignity, the locomotive DALMUNZIE pronounced with a silent Z like MENZIES, was like an aristocrat chaperoning a pair of grand old ladies.

Although sad with wear it was great to know they had not been lost to the scrap man. The engine showed signs that it had seen a lot of action and might even have been receiving some much needed attention and tinkering of its inner parts in recent months.

The carriages on the other hand, (size wise, look-a-likes of the bug wagons on the Ffestiniog Railway in North Wales), after suffering from years of neglect, were in a dilapidated state, but nothing a new coat of varnish and some brand new side panels couldn't fix. They could quickly be restored to original condition.

The most interesting aspect I noticed was that both passenger vehicles had their own independent braking systems provided by Motor Rail of Bedford the manufacturer of the Simplex locomotive.

With Simon's authority I began to remove some of the surrounding paraphernalia to eagerly take a few photographs to record the auspicious occasion for the future.

It was whilst carrying out this operation the Laird told me a couple of facts about the creation of the Railway before he had to rush away to shoot some grouse for dinner.

I hastily wrote in my notebook, built in the 1920's by Sir Archibald Birkmyre, length 2 ½ miles with a switchback.

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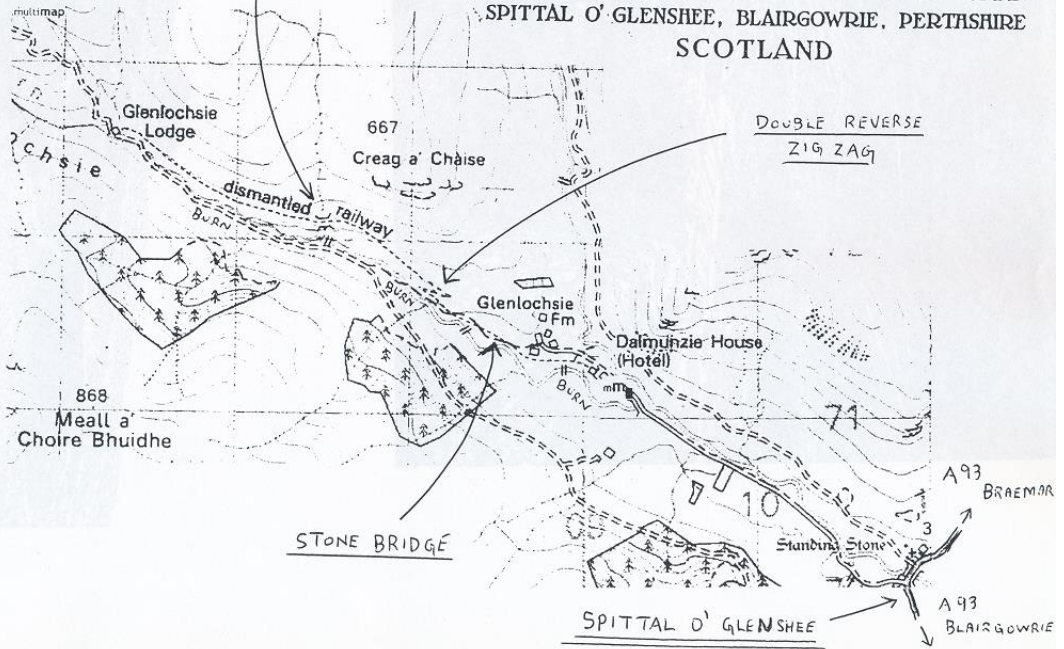
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▲ GLAS TULACHAN
3448 FT

DALMUNZIE HOTEL & ESTATES LTD.
SPITTAL O' GLENSHEE, BLAIRGOWRIE, PERTSHIRE
SCOTLAND



masonry plinths allowing a stream to run down beneath the span to join the Glenlochisie Burn flowing in the bottom of the valley.

Further on the single track railway line became lost again under the vehicle transit route but could be easily picked up once more if you knew exactly what you were looking for. Traces of the line appearing again shortly before the made up surface forked away to drop down to the river.

The tractor trail continued on the far bank.

In my own carefree way I was merrily going along still following the clues when to my horror the trackbed came to a sudden halt at a wooden buffer stop. Perplexed I peered into the far distance and saw nothing to suggest the course of the line continued beyond this point.

I had only travelled for one mile at the most, there must be more trackbed somewhere, I felt, or else I had been left roamin' in the gloamin'.

Perhaps I had wandered down a siding by mistake, mystified I turned around to retrace my steps only to discover the missing trackbed about ten feet away soaring upwards into the sky by the means of a precipitous incline.

So this was the switchback Simon Winton had mentioned.

Before starting up the unbelievable slope I went past a strange gully cut into the hillside, it was at rail height which lead me to think that it might have been connected with the railway, but for what reason was beyond my ken.

I now commenced my onslaught on the rising gradient, this in reality was a green grass track sandwiched in between clumps of heather on either side. It rose for about 400 yards at an average of 1 in 20, but became much steeper just before the summit buffer stop, this final ramp seemed to be of man made construction built on ground which might have been at a tilt of 1 in 12.

A reverse here over another set of points brought the train onto the next level of track about 100 feet higher than the valley bottom section of railway line.

Like the train would have done, I doubled back on myself to once more face the head of the glen on the same alignment.

It was just a few yards after starting on the higher stretch of line that two amazing apparitions revealed themselves to my vision.

The first was to be found under my feet, for now instead of slowly ambling along as before, I was now forced to step out at a regular pace, the soles of my boots firmly placing themselves on sleepers set at same distance apart. Some of the sleepers were buried and some were exposed, they reached into the far distance.

Of course, this was probably to be expected, the men who had dismantled the railway probably thought it was not worth their time and effort to remove the sleepers on the top section of trackbed, concentrating only on the easy pickings close to Dalmunzie House.

Today maybe more thought and consideration would have been taken to restore the environment back to its original natural condition.

The result of the above non-action was to leave in situ, for others to witness, a marvellous mixture of wooden and concrete sleepers to stride along on, most of the latter were studded with metal clips for holding the rail securely in place.

I was astounded for I had never come across a narrow gauge railway until recent times which had laid concrete sleepers before, a strange and uncommon sight to behold.

Questions arose in my mind, could this have been the first narrow gauge railway in the world to have used concrete sleepers ? I argued that it would make sense to lay them up at this altitude as even using the best timbered sleepers would mean that they would rot away very fast indeed on the exposed hillside after attracting rain, snow and ice for much of the year.

It would have been a full time task replacing the timber sleepers, reinforced concrete sleepers were the logical answer, so did the revolution first take place at Dalmunzie ?

The second spectacle took place when I was suddenly awoken from my thoughts by a powerful downbeat of wings.

A peregrine falcon swooped past me, not more than 5 feet above my head.

I looked up and followed its flight and then noticed out of the corner of my eye a wood pigeon on a mid air collision course with the larger bird.

I watched dumbfounded as the peregrine struck the pigeon with its razor sharp talons ripping the birds head and neck open, partially decapitating it.

As the knocked out pigeon began to hurtle to the ground the peregrine did a speedy U turn manoeuvre and caught its quarry, even before it had fallen a few feet.

The raptor flew off with its prey in its clutches leaving a few blood stained feathers delicately floating earthwards.

It was all over in seconds, a hair-raising incident indeed and a good story to tell in the pub for the next week or so.

Despite my thoughts being distracted by the cruelty of the natural world my feet were still being drawn along on the route of the railway and without realising how far I had travelled. I suddenly regained my senses at a substantial stone and metal girder bridge which spanned a stream that had carved a deep gorge through the rocky hillside.

The bridge had rusted handrails on either side to prevent a fall of fifteen feet or more into the fast flowing waters below. This was engineering in the wilderness.

I pressed on estimating that I had at least another half mile to go before I reached the end of the line. The trackbed still followed its escarpment along the hillside only going once or twice into tiny boggy cuttings with carefully placed boulders on their outer edges.

All things must come to an end and so it was that the railway ran out of room to proceed any further. A swift running stream lay directly ahead dashing itself on huge rocks and sending spray into the swirling fog and mist which clung to the end of the glen.

This major stream was actually named on my map as the Allt Clais Mhor. I don't think it would have been feasible for the railway to have penetrated any further as unpredictable swollen winter floods probably would have swept the trackbed away.

Hidden in the heather at the terminus of the line a quaint little platform had been built for passengers to decant.

A run-round siding was also provided for shunting purposes, the carriages and wagons no doubt being pushed or pulled out of the way of the locomotives by hand.

Not too far away in the valley below I spied the ruined two storey building that was once Glenlochsie Lodge, this was the haunt of stalkers past.

The thick walled stone built structure must have been a most welcoming sight if anyone managed to get caught out by surprise in the savage Scottish weather. I myself have been snowbound several times before and certainly knew what could befall one in an instant at these heights.

Even today, the Lodge still boasted a tiny bit of wavy tiled roof of a greenish, blue hue (maybe Ballachulish slate) which could provide a bit of shelter from the storm I was presently experiencing.

A rough path led down from the platform to cross the Allt Clais Mhor burn by a very rickety old wooden bridge, some of its planks had been washed away revealing the torrents below whilst those remaining were extremely slippery, being coated in mildew.

Chancing a nasty injury I managed to cross the hazard and after clambering over a pile of fallen masonry eventually arrived at the front door of Glenlochsie Lodge.

I didn't bother to knock, there was nobody at home, the premises were still lived in however, something told me that Glenlochsie Lodge was now the luxury abode of Highland sheep.

After reaching a safe spot amongst the rubble I began to look around and noticed immediately the grand fireplace erected at the railway end of the building. It was so big you could roast a whole ox or stag in it and no doubt previous occupiers must have done so at one time. Oh for a roaring fire now to erase the dampness from my bones.

I imagined the Lodge in the 1800's a quiet and lonely place set on the high ground between two river systems which provided drinking and washing water.

The upper floors were now open to the sky but you could make out where the cross beams existed which once supported the bedroom and loft floors.

A toilet block extension was tacked on to the end of the Lodge. I confess I made use of the facilities whilst all the time thinking who else might have relieved themselves here.

Becoming aware of my solitary existence and that I was a long way from home I began to think of returning before I started suffering the early stages of delirium.

Before setting forth however I ate my emergency ration, consisting of a rock hard Mars bar, this I hoped will give me enough energy for the long journey, facing into the howling wind and torrents of rain back to Dalmunzie House.

The light was fading fast, when I eventually staggered back to my car to change out of my drenched clothes.

Feeling civilised again and like a moth drawn by a lingering light, I once more entered the hotel but this time headed straight for the bar.

The only thing that had kept me going on the return journey down the trackbed was the promise of a warming whisky in the comfortable surroundings of the snug.

It was whilst laid back in the soft leather arm chair, downing my drink, that my eyes alighted to a locomotive name plate fixed over the tavern doorway GLENLOCHSIE.....so there must have been two locomotives on the little line at Dalmunzie at some time in the distant past.

As I finished my fourth dram I began to dream I had discovered a secret railway that headed straight to heaven, buried on a Scottish mountainside.

I couldn't wait to start my research.