

Anthony Troon travels the East Highland route through **Dornoch** to **Bonar Bridge** where pockets of heaven are hiding in the hills

THE high moors of eastern Sutherland meet the sea gently and beautifully. Inland you have wild expanses of heather, bracken and bog, enclosing hill lochs where the native brown trout rise with gusto to the fly.

But down at sea level the firthlands cut boldly into the coast, with fertile fields backed dramatically by loch and mountain. This route, starting from Dornoch, shows off the scenic variety in just one corner of the huge county.

And Dornoch itself, a well cared-for town with world-famous golf links and several excellent hotels, is a place you'll be happy to explore when you return at the end of the run.

The Castle Hotel in the town centre, for example, is a 16th century bishop's palace, while the Royal Golf Hotel has as its address "The First Tee, Dornoch".

There's a stylish craft shop and gallery in the 19th century former town jail. Start off northwards where a sign points towards Embo.

The route becomes a single-track road with the sea at your right hand.

You could make the short detour to Embo, a one-time fishing village now given over to camping and caravanning, with a fine sandy beach. Back on the route, you can see in the distance on the far side of Loch Fleet the imposing and controversial memorial statue to the 1st Duke of Sutherland which stares out from Ben Bhraggie.

The road turns westwards near Littleferry, a former boat crossing, following the edge of the sea-loch which is a nature reserve.

Near the ruin of Skelbo Castle is a lay-by which gives a fine view of the wading birds.

Seals can sometimes be spotted on the sandbanks. Shortly afterwards the single-track road connects with the A9 and you turn right to cross the neck of the loch by the Thomas Telford-designed causeway, soon reaching Golspie. This pleasant coastal village might tempt you to linger for a walk on the beach or to seek out the Big Burn Walk where a waterfall splashes in a small gorge.

Half-a-mile from Golspie lies Dunrobin

Castle, the most northerly of our great houses, parts of which date from the 14th century.

The ancestral home of the Sutherlands is a great tourist magnet, with its formal gardens, collections of Pictish stones, geological and wildlife specimens (open until October 15).

DRIVING up the coast, the next village is Brora, also settled by displaced people from the glens during the 19th century Highland Clearances. The recently-opened Brora Heritage Centre has interesting displays on local history and a dinosaur play area for kids.

Malt whisky aficionados will also know this as the birthplace of Clynelish, where the visitor centre is open all year (restricted hours November to February, phone 01408 623000). Now our route leaves the A9 and heads for the hills.

The narrow road past the heritage centre, signposted Gordonbush and Balnacoll, leads by Loch Brora under its frowning crags and starts

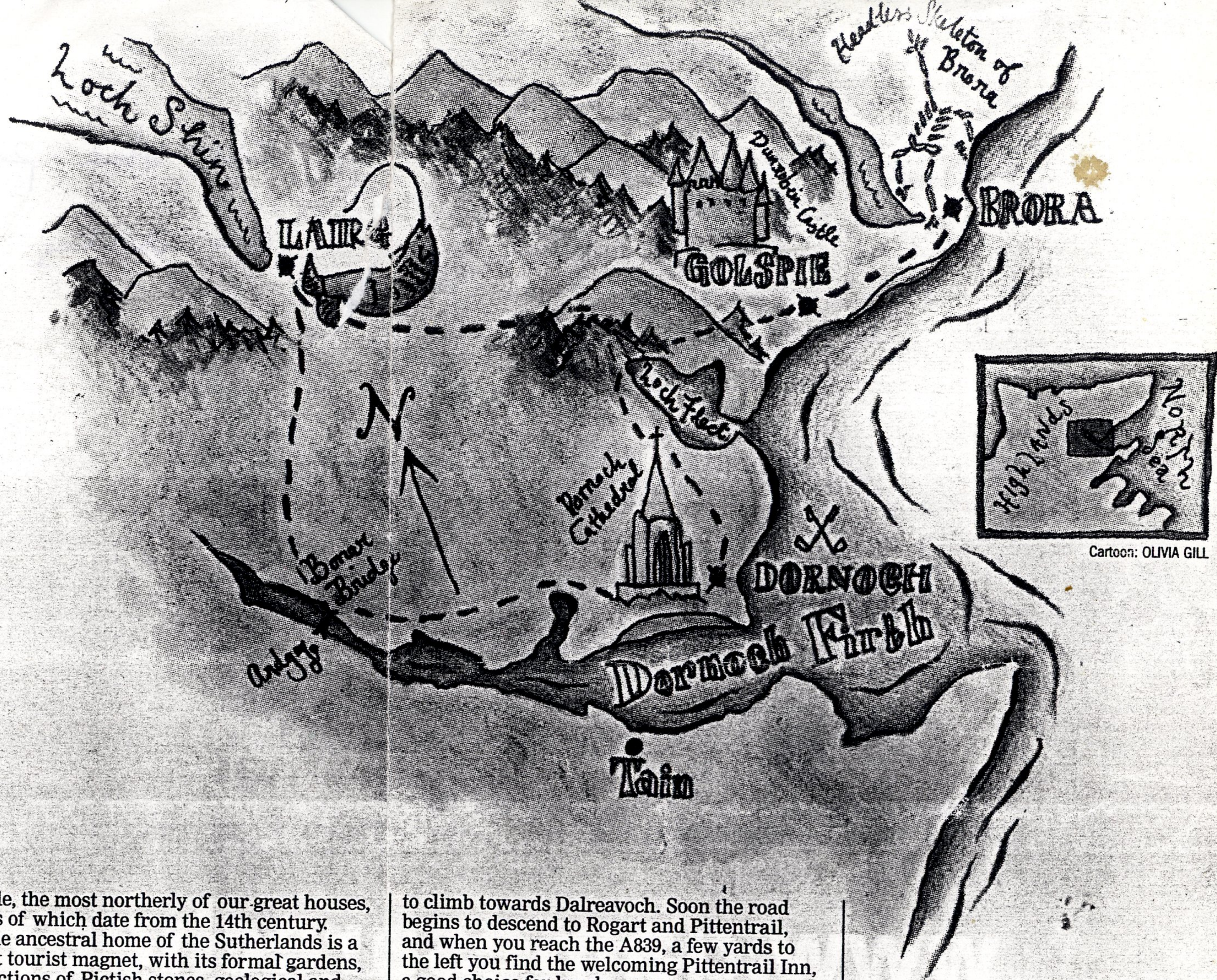
to climb towards Dalreavoch. Soon the road begins to descend to Rogart and Pittentrail, and when you reach the A839, a few yards to the left you find the welcoming Pittentrail Inn, a good choice for lunch.

Our route leads westwards along Strath Fleet by the A839, past the unseen Loch Craggie, one of Scotland's most famous trout lochs.

The next port of call is Lairg at the head of Loch Shin, where the Ferrycroft Countryside Centre (open until October 28) can give information on a local archeological trail and directions to the Falls of Shin five miles away.

From Lairg, the A836 continues south through Invershin to Bonar Bridge, once the main crossing at the Kyle of Sutherland until the building of the Dornoch Bridge.

From Bonar Bridge there are wonderful views to the mountainous interior of Easter Ross. Then there is an easy drive ahead through Spinningdale, following the signs for that enchanting place called Dornoch whose name, misleadingly means "nebby"



RouteSummary

Distance: 69 miles

Traffic: Light, except on A9 north

Eating & Drinking: Pittentrail Inn, Rogart; Restaurant at Falls of Shin; 2 Quail restaurant, Dornoch

Attractions: Nature reserve at Littleferry, Dunrobin Castle, Brora Heritage Centre, Loch Craggie (trout loch)