

Thomas Telford and the bridge at Loch Fleet.

Sir Thomas Telford was born in Westerkirk, Scotland in 1757. He was the son of a shepherd and apprenticed to a stonemason at the age of 14. In 1792 he moved to London. In 1787 when he was appointed as the surveyor of public works for Shropshire he was already well known as an engineer. After several large projects in England, Telford returned to Scotland and started upon some of his greatest works. Between 1803 and 1821 he constructed 920 miles of road and more than 1200 bridges. He died in 1834.

The military roads build by General Wade in response to the problems encountered by the military when dealing with the Rising of the Clans in 1715 and 1719, were now falling seriously into disrepair. Added to this the economic and social collapse which had arisen following the Highland Clearances and collapse of the old clan system meant that a far more efficient system of transport had to be put in place to bring much needed prosperity to the region.

In 1802 Telford was sent by the Government to investigate and make suggestions on how to improve the Highland roads. Following his report a Commission for Highland Roads and Bridges was established in 1804 to manage the building of the planned roads.

Thomas Telford built roads, bridges, harbours, and canals all over Scotland and two major building projects are in the local area and made a huge difference to the lives of the people here.

These projects included the building of two bridges of vital importance in the opening up of the North East of Scotland for greater trade, transport and therefore prosperity. Before this the road to Wick and Thurso was very hazardous with many crossings by small and unpredictable ferries.

In 1811 a bridge was constructed over the Dornoch Firth at Bonar Bridge, only 2 years after the terrible disaster on the Meikle Ferry where so many people lost their lives. In 1818 a bridge at The Mound was completed.

Creating a bridge at The Mound was a major feat of engineering. At this point the River Fleet joins the sea loch, Loch Fleet, and the ground is made up of low-lying mudflats and shingle. The tidal currents race in and out through a narrow channel twice every 24 hours.

In the Seventh Report of the Commissioners for Highland Roads and Bridges April 1813 it was stated '*It is observable, that by means of this Mound, a communication will be perfected to the remotest part of Scotland, without the necessity of submitting to the Inconvenience of a single Ferry; those of Dunkeld, Beauley, Conan, and the Mickle Ferry of the Dornoch Firth, having been already superseded by means of the aid afforded under the Highland Road and Bridge Act*'.

Telford built an earthen mound nearly 1,000 yards long to carry a road and bridge across this junction of the loch and river. The bridge was built on four arches (later increased to 6 to cope with a greater volume of water) with sluice gates to hold back the seawater as the tide rose and let out the fresh water from the river as the tide fell. The sluices were 12 feet wide and when flooding occurred required winches to operate them. Outside the Museum is one of the winches used to regulate the sluice gates. The winches were replaced in 2004 after nearly 200 years of use.

A cottage was built for the sluice gate keeper and this was also used as a Post Office for the community at The Mound railway station, which linked the Dornoch Light Railway to the main line between 1902 and 1960. The current A9 flyover replaces Telford's bridge for the main roadway, but the original sluice gates are still in operation.

When Telford reported in 1828 on the improvement to the roads over the last 25 years he stated that in 1808 *'in surveying for the future Roads, it was with difficulty and not without danger that I could scramble along a rugged broken sandy shore or by narrow tracks on the edge of precipices frequently interrupted by rude and inconvenient ferries'*, he went on to say that *'now a mail coach passes daily from Tain by Bonar Bridge, the Fleet Mound, Dunrobin, Helmsdale and the Ord of Caithness, to the extremity of the Island at Wick and Thurso without being interrupted by a single ferry.'*

The improvements of the roads led not only to an increase in communication with more frequent mail coaches, it also opened up the way for tourism which in turn led to an increase in employment and services to cater for this. Many new hotels and holiday homes were built around this time. The new roads also led to an increase in trade such as the exportation of timber and many of the local forests were planted for this purpose.

The building of the Fleet Mound bridge and sluice gates in 1818 led to the reclaiming of some 400 acres, which had previously been covered by high tide and this land was used for growing alders and willows (used for basketmaking). This area, The Mound Alderwood, is now part of the Loch Fleet National Nature Reserve. The sluice gates also enable salmon and sea trout to continue to migrate to and from their spawning grounds

Loch Fleet National Nature Reserve covers over 1000 hectares with a range of habitats including woodland, estuarine, salt marshes, sand dunes and coastline. It offers stunning views of the surrounding country and is home to a wide variety of both plant and animal life. This includes rare plants, butterflies, seals (which can often be seen resting on the spits of sand in the loch), otters and a huge variety of birds including many waders and seasonal visitors.