



Cattle Droving in Scotland

Droving is the name given to the driving of animals from one place to another. Many kinds of animal were driven in the past – sheep in most areas, even geese on occasion in the south of England – but for the purposes of this article, I have concentrated on cattle. From the earliest times that Man kept larger animals, there has often been the need to move them around – whether a few at a time or by the thousand. They may be moved according to season – down from the hills in Winter then back up to fresh pasture in Spring – or from where they were raised, to market. Droving to market used to be common practice in Scotland, where surplus stock was raised in the Highlands and Islands to sell in more populated areas for meat and hides. Initially the droving to market was from remote areas to small markets, later from Highland areas to the more populated and better off towns within Lowlands. However as time went on enterprising drovers sought new markets and cattle were driven ever further south, though they commonly changed hands at lowland markets and perhaps again in the north of England where they might rest for a period being fattened up before the long trek south to London.

Timeline – the rise and fall of long-distance droving

- Since pre-History – local moving of cattle between pastures
- As early as 1359 there is a record of two Scottish drovers being given letters of safe passage through England with cattle, horses and other merchandise but for centuries the trade didn't flourish. The main reason was civil wars, but also reivers (see below) prevented much movement of cattle. Most droving was to sell at local markets.
- Reivers were cattle thieves, the most notorious of which were the Border Reivers, raiders who operated along the Anglo-Scottish border from the late 13th century to the beginning of the 17th century. There were both Scottish and English men involved, and they raided the entire Border country without regard to their victims' nationality. However, cattle theft was rife throughout much of the rest of Scotland for centuries – thefts between clans, between glens and between rival landlords. All of these involved men stealing cattle (or other animals) and droving them to their own land or to sell elsewhere.
- in 1603 James the Sixth ascended the throne of England as James the First of England, uniting the crowns of Scotland and England. By 1607, free trade had been agreed between the two countries, though customs duties were payable on hides and cattle. Reivers were “actively discouraged”.
- From the mid-1600s, trade with England was increased greatly by both the expanding English population and the need for beef to feed the armies and navies fighting a long series of wars in Europe. Droving within and from Scotland had grown to be a huge operation. In 1663, for example, Carlisle recorded 18,574 cattle passing through. At times 80% of the cattle arriving at the London meat market of Smithfield for slaughter came from Scotland!

- The Union of the Parliaments in 1707, forming Great Britain, increased the demand for Scottish beef even more. By the middle of the century, one estimate at the time put the total cattle exported from Scotland at 80,000 a year.
- In the period 1750 to 1860 were the notorious Highland Clearances, when many tenants were forcibly cleared from the land to make way for sheep, and cattle became less important in some areas.
- By the beginning of the 1800's, main roads were becoming greatly improved, but much Highland droving continued to be over rough open country, which many drovers preferred. In the Lowlands, the main issue became the charging of fees for travel and also for overnight "stances".
- by the 1830s, steamships were being built and farmers in coastal areas started to ship cattle directly to the southern markets instead of by the long arduous overland droves. Then, once railways were established by the 1880s, this provided an even faster and more reliable means of transporting cattle. Also, enclosing of fields and improved breeding was producing a better quality of cattle, which were not hardy enough to walk the great distances.
- By 1900 the great markets were all but dead. In Scotland, the last drove over the [Corrieairack Pass](#) is believed to have taken place in 1906.

Drove Routes

In the hey-day of droving in Scotland, all roads led to Crieff or later Falkirk and Dumfries, where the largest markets were held. There were many drove routes (see map for the main ones).

Some of the most important of these were:

- from the far north to Inverness and then south via the route of the current A9
- from Aberdeenshire, many routes feeding onto the A9
- from Skye and the outer Isles by boat, then via Fort Augustus and Dalwhinnie to the A9 or south via Killin
- from the inner isles and Argyll via Callander to Doune or via Ardlui direct to Falkirk
- from Ireland and all over Galloway to Dumfries

[The place names listed above may not have existed at that time, but they allow us to visualise the routes].



The road system in Scotland in those days was almost non-existent. Most "roads" were just rough tracks, not always even passable by horse and cart, and mostly used by pack-horses and travellers on foot. The main drove "roads" however were often quite wide, worn away by the passing of thousands of animals. The route of the modern A9 was probably one of these, but it would not have been passable during the winter months, due to snow at the high Drumochter Pass. Another very difficult route was from Fort Augustus to Dalwhinnie over the Corrieairack Pass, which is high, very steep in places and even today only passable by 4x4 vehicles. Rivers rarely had bridges, and if there was no ford, the animals were swum across. Sometimes if the current was strong, animals would be lost. If the drovers were lucky there might be a ferry; if not then presumably they also would swim.

The Cattle

The cattle produced in the Highlands were the ancestors of today's Highland cattle. They were much smaller and more agile than today's animals, shaggy, long-horned and black. Descendants of the old Celtic oxen, they were and still are, the hardiest of breeds and easy to handle.

In the mid-19th century red/brown variants appeared in Glen Lyon. The new gene proved to be dominant and this is now the colour of most of the modern breed, though black, white and other shades are found.

How it Worked

The Highlands, of Scotland have long hard winters. The soils are not very fertile and often poorly drained. They are suited to rearing hardy cattle, but crops - mostly oats, and also a few vegetables - could only be grown on lower-lying valley floors. Cattle were vital to the survival of the highlanders, who historically lived in clan groups ruled by their clan chieftains and in later years, after the '45 rebellion, as tenants with grazing rights. The beasts, as they were called, were used for milk and cheese-making, but were mostly a "cash crop" for export to the meat-hungry south.

The drove "season" was between May/June and October because winter weather was unsuitable for long-distance travel. Also, if surplus stock was not moved before the next winter, there would be insufficient feed for the vast number of beasts raised in the north and west.

Some drovers drove beasts for owners or dealers who would attend the markets, others for larger landowners on commission, some risked their own money buying beasts with cash and credit notes. However it was funded, the drove was gathered together in Spring over a period of some weeks, obtaining single beasts from the poorer tenants, and larger numbers from landowners or at small local markets which were set up on an ad-hoc basis when dealers notified they would be in the area (often via a notice at the local kirk).

If the cattle were raised on an island such as Skye, or the outer isles, the first hurdle was loading them into a rickety boat and rowing or sailing it across to the mainland. On shorter crossings the beasts would be swum across. A similar procedure would be required if a loch or large river had to be crossed.

Scottish droving was on a huge scale. Gradually the long-distance drovers would gather a drove (herd) of at least 200 beasts, sometimes much larger up to 2,000 strong or more, with one drover to each 50-60 beasts and sometimes a "topsmen" in charge. Ahead of them lay a long and dangerous journey, through bogs, over mountain passes and across rivers. In some areas there were roads of sorts; but particularly on the earlier part of the journey, it would be easy to lose the way navigating rough tracks. And there was always the need to find grazing and water for the beasts and sustenance for men and dogs. There were many regularly used "stances" on the main drove routes which were used for this purpose.

All roads led down to the "tryst" (deriving from meeting), meaning a fair or market. The biggest ones were held initially at Crieff, but by 1770 Falkirk had become more important. The trysts took place there on the first Tuesday of August, September and October. Other smaller trysts were held elsewhere including Doune. There was also a thriving cattle rearing area in Galloway, in south-west Scotland, with an important market in Dumfries.

At the tryst the drovers or dealers would negotiate to sell their cattle to others who drove them on to good grazing areas in Northumberland, the Yorkshire Dales or East Anglia. Here they would be fattened after their long journey before being driven on further to the London markets.

The Drover's Life

Most Scottish drovers came from a long family line with a tradition of war-fare and reiving (rustling). They were well accustomed to a life of action and privation and were therefore well suited to the droving work. They were a scary looking bunch – “Great stalwart hirsute men, shaggy and uncultured and wild, who look like bears as they lounge heavily along,” as one person described them at the time. They were usually armed with a sgian-dubh (knife or short sword), or a pistol (these were permitted even after the clans were banned from carrying arms), as it was a risky occupation.

They were greatly skilled. Listing the necessary attributes of a drover, A.R.B. Haldane, who made a special study of the drove in the 1940's, lists the attributes they had to have as:

- “extensive and intimate knowledge of the country,
- endurance and an ability to face great hardship,
- knowledge of cattle,
- resource, enterprise and good judgment,
- honesty and reliability for responsible work that was entrusted to him.”

The routes were long, the climate harsh even in summer, and the drovers hardy. Some were lucky and had one of the small, shaggy, tough Highland ponies to carry them, but these were mostly used to carry provisions, blankets and perhaps odd items to sell along the way. Most walked - commonly 15-20 km a day – not that far in actual distance, but over rough tracks and constantly on the move herding the animals. They had dogs with them to help with the cattle, and at night these would help to keep a lookout for reivers.

There were few inns and the drovers mostly slept in the open, preferring anyway to keep an eye on the beasts, with only their plaid (a heavy woollen shawl worn over a shoulder and wrapped round the body) for protection from the elements. If they found a remote inn, a hot meal might be provided. Otherwise it was oatmeal, perhaps with the odd onion, and occasionally some blood obtained from one of the cattle to make black pudding! They carried much of their food with them, as there would be few places to buy more. As evening entertainment, there might be a wee dram if they were lucky, or perhaps someone would play the pipes. Dogs would share the men's food and the cattle and ponies would be left to fend for themselves at night.

It is an interesting fact that after the Highland Clearances, many families whose menfolk through the generations had been clan warriors, then reivers, then drovers, ended up in America as cowboys rounding up the cattle (and no doubt some of them doing a bit of cattle rustling!)

Droving and Doune

Markets were held in Doune from 1611, when the Earl of Moray was given permission to erect a mercat cross in the burgh. These would initially have been general markets, but by the 1690's the village had become the site of a major cattle market, mainly for beasts coming from Skye and North West Scotland and possibly also Argyll. (It was from a Doune Tryst that Robin Oig set out on the ill-fated journey to England described in Sir Walter Scott's 1827 tale of *The Two Drovers*.) This market long remained of considerable importance, and at the time of the Statistical Account of 1798, 10,000 cattle were sold at the week-long “Snowy Doune ” tryst in November.

In order to attract drovers to the trysts in Doune, unlike at Crieff and Fallkirk, no dues were charged on cattle sold, and the cattle were allowed to graze free for a week before the fair began.

Proceedings in 1768 note that Stirling tried to stop the Doune trysts, because they were damaging the ones at Stirling by reducing the sales and the income from tolls for cattle crossing the bridge. However, legal action was unsuccessful, and cattle sold in Doune found routes south across fords to avoid paying dues at the bridge.

The main drove routes into Doune were from the Callander direction or along the north of Loch Earn and then south to Doune. The drove routes from the north met at The Cross in Doune and that is thought to be partly why the village grew up where it did and why the Mercat Cross is now located there. The cattle were driven to a large area at the Crofts, the area now covered by Doune Ponds, to graze and await the tryst. The churning up caused by the animals' feet prepared the land for growing, and the dung made it very fertile, so this area was used by the locals for crop growing from Spring onwards. At the biggest fairs, the cattle would spread all over the Carse of Cambus and the lower Braes of Doune.

It must have been an amazing experience for the locals watching the Tryst – thousands of beasts gathered together along with the drovers' ponies and dogs – noisy, smelly, exciting. Drovers, tacksmen* and dealers from north and south, all mingling with the beasts and haggling to obtain the best deals. Gold or other cash occasionally changed hands - hence the name "gold stone" sometimes given to the huge rock now at the Ponds, where deals allegedly took place. However more commonly a complicated and often risky system of credit notes was used. These operated as cash and could change hands many times before hopefully being redeemed, months or even years later.

(Tacksman - a landlord's top tenant in the Highlands who sublets to the other tenants – at the market to collect the money owed to the owners of some of the larger groups of animals.)*

As well as the cattle there were horses and sheep for sale. There were tents selling refreshments, booths set up by banks to accept and pay out money, and all sorts of traders, musicians and other entertainers and beggars mingling with the crowds. Men shouting in Gaelic, Scots and a variety of English dialects added to the excitement and confusion.

The booths selling food were probably spread along the main street and those selling wares such as locally made leather goods may have been nearer to the Tryst itself. All the local "inns" (and there were many) would be selling drink – much of it probably locally made and illegal. The wealthier dealers would seek accommodation, if they could find it, but the drovers would bed down near their animals to keep an eye on them.

As the beasts changed hands, they were marked by the new owners with tar. Then, from Doune they were driven on south by the new owners, or sometimes by the same drovers as before but now hired by a dealer, often eventually heading for Smithfield Market in London.

Refs *The Drove Roads of Scotland, A.R.B.Haldane, 1952*
 The Statistical Account, Parish of Kilmadock, 1798
 The Highland Drovers scotshistoryonline.co.uk