

Strath 3

Strath Marble Quarries



Marble has been quarried in the district of Strath since the early 18th Century and continues today at Torrín. This excursion provides details of the various phases of marble extraction, during the first decade of the 20th Century, when a narrow-gauge rail system was constructed to convey material to a pier at Broadford, through to the present day.

Aspects covered: details of the Cambro-Ordovician Durness Group dolostones and marbles; historic development of quarrying activity; the abandoned [Suardal/Kilchrist](#) quarries and narrow-gauge rail system; roadside abandoned quarry at [Cnoc Slapin](#); the active [Torrín Quarry](#).

Route: [Loch Cill Chriosd](#) - [Suardal/Kilchrist](#) to [Broadford](#) (5km, 3 miles) – [Cnoc Slapin](#) (roadside) - [Torrín Quarry](#) (roadside).

Time: 3-4 hours.

General comments: Three localities are involved, with two of them ([Cnoc Slapin](#) and the [Torrín Quarry](#)) limited to (roadside) views. Most of the time allocated to this excursion is for the Early 20th Century quarrying at [Suardal/Kilchrist](#), where the abandoned workings and remains of the associated infrastructure can be accessed. If time permits, the route of the rail track to [Broadford](#), the [Marble Line Path](#), can be walked and Strath's varied scenery enjoyed.

[Loch Cill Chriosd](#) (Kilchrist) is located on the north side of the Broadford-Elgol (B8083) road, 5km (3 miles) SW of [Broadford](#). Parking is available on the south side of the road, opposite the [Cill Chriosd graveyard](#).

Geological background:

The Cambro-Ordovician Durness Group dolostones (solution) weather to classic clint-and-gryke surfaces. Chert concretions are common.



Figure Strath 3.1: Typical dolostone with clint and gryke surface (pavement and solution hollows, respectively), Durness Group, Strath. Pole c. 1m long.



Figure Strath 3.2: Typical chert-bearing dolostone, Durness Group, Strath. Pole c. 1m long.

During the subsequent thermal metamorphism of the dolostones by the Paleocene Beinn an Dubhaich Granite, various calc-silicate minerals formed, commonly involving the development of concentric zones of metamorphic minerals at chert-dolostone boundaries. Consequently, the marble has a distinct 'spheroidal' appearance.

The marble was rich in forsterite, formed by high-grade thermal metamorphism closest to the Beinn an Dubhaich Granite. This olivine subsequently hydrated to serpentine, giving the rock a patchy developed distinctive yellow-green coloration. Dark aggregates of brucite, after original (metamorphic) periclase, are also common.



Figure Strath 3.3: Weathered surface of forsterite (now serpentine) marble, with remnants of a chert nodule at core of concentricly banded area, Durness Group, Strath. Coin c. 24mm across.



Figure Strath 3.5: Fresh surface of forsterite (now serpentine) marble. Coin c. 24mm across.

Historical development of the Strath marble quarries:

The first record of marble extraction in Strath is attributed to the Skye writer, Martin Martin. In his book *A Description of the Western Islands of Scotland*, published in 1703, he describes quarrying of material on the south side of Strath Suardal. It is thought that material quarried during this early phase was used in Iona Abbey and Armadale Castle.

The most obvious historical extraction of marble took place for a brief period at the beginning of the 20th Century. The Skye Marble Company was set up in 1907, with quarries developed SE of [Loch Cill Chriosd](#), connected to a [pier at Broadford](#) by a narrow-gauge (914mm or 3 feet) rail track. Records indicate up to 25 workers, many from Belgium, were housed nearby on the north side of the [Broadford](#) to [Torrin](#) road.

Within a few years, the enterprise failed, causing liquidation of the company. Remnants of some buildings and parts of the rail infrastructure still exist, although some detective work is required as no detailed records have survived.

The locations of [upper](#) and [lower](#) branches of the rail track at the abandoned quarries are still visible, as is the main line to [Broadford](#), the so-called [Marble Line Path](#). Still preserved on-site items of interest include remnants of some buildings, including a crushing plant, the loading platform, and the base of a wagon winch/turntable.

The railhead at [Broadford](#) was located on the west side of the bay; a [bridge](#) crossed the [Broadford River](#) and the line terminated at MacKinnon's Pier. Prior to the use of a small locomotive in 1911, the bogies (wagons) were horse-drawn. The locomotive used, *Skylark*, was built in 1892 by the Hunslet Engine Company of Leeds. *Skylark* was scrapped in 1925.

The abandoned quarry at [Cnoc Slapin](#) opened in 1951, predominantly for agricultural lime. It closed in the late 1950s and a new quarry, the [Torrin Quarry](#), was opened to the SE, east of [Cnoc Dubh](#) in [Torrin](#).



Figure Strath 3.4: Weathered surface of forsterite (now serpentine) marble, with remnants of a chert nodule at core of concentricly banded area, Durness Group, Strath. Coin c. 24mm across.

The [Torrin Quarry](#) was developed by William Thomson Forsyth in 1960 and is currently (2022) owned by Leiths Group and run by a small workforce. Onsite crushing is for agricultural lime, pebble-dash for external decoration of houses, and concrete products, together with the selection of suitable material as dimension (building) stone. The lateral extent of the quarry is limited, and ongoing development is predominantly downwards.

In this account, the Suardal/Kilchrist phase is dealt with in most detail, as its development has the most interesting social dimension. The other two locations require very little time as they do not involve direct access to the sites.

The starting point to examining the abandoned quarries and infrastructure at [Suardal/Kilchrist](#) is the [Cill Chriosd graveyard](#) on the Broadford-Elgol (B8083) road, 5km (3 miles) SW of [Broadford](#). Limited parking is available on the south side of the road.

Locality 1 [NG 6171 2070]:

The ruined post-Reformation [church](#) of [Cill Chriosd](#) (Kilchrist, Christ's Church) dates to the early 16th Century, replacing an earlier medieval church. The west gable is, in part, of medieval age. The church closed in 1840, enabling the landowner of much of Strath, Lord MacDonald, to clear the villages of [Suisnish](#) and [Boreraig](#) on [Loch Eishort](#), with the justification that they lived too far from the replacement church in [Broadford](#). Many of the graves belong to members of the Clan MacKinnon. One grave of note is located just inside the churchyard gate, a medieval slab with a floriated cross. The hillock beside the ruins is locally known as Cnoc na-Aifhreann, or the *Hill of the Mass*, and may be related to a legend that Saint Maelrubha held mass here for local inhabitants in the 7th Century.

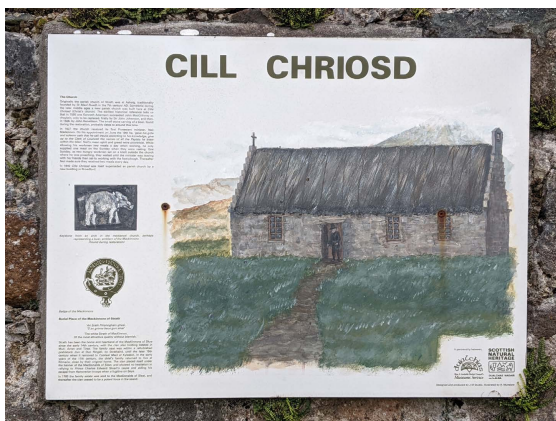


Figure Strath 3.6: Information board within ruins of the Cill(e) Chriosd church.



Figure Strath 3.7: Ruins of the Cill(e) Chriosd church and graveyard.

Approximately 250m to the NE along the road there is a [track](#) heading SE to the [Marble Line Path \(Broadford-Kilchrist\)](#), which utilises the original track-bed of the quarry narrow-gauge railway.

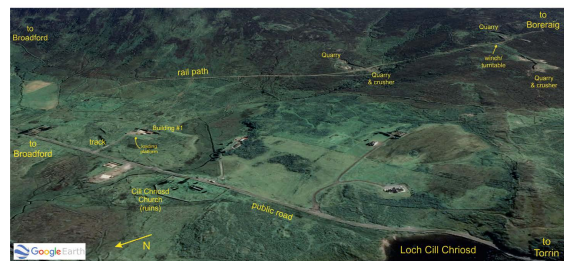


Figure Strath 3.8: Annotated Google Earth® images of the area around the abandoned Kilchrist quarries and narrow-gauge railway.



Figure Strath 3.9: Skye Marble display board, Kilchrist.

Figures Strath 3.10 – 3.20 illustrate key features of the abandoned quarries in the area around [\[NG 6210 2013\]](#):



Figure Strath 3.10: Track along the line of the Kilchrist-Broadford narrow-gauge railway. View is towards the north.



Figure Strath 3.11: Information boards at the abandoned quarries, Kilchrist. View towards the west, with [Blà-bheinn](#) ('Blaven') in the distance.



Figure Strath 3.12: Entrance to one of the abandoned quarries at [\[NG 6218 2015\]](#).



Figure Strath 3.13: Abandoned quarry at [\[NG 6218 2015\]](#).



Figure Strath 3.14: Part of the building infrastructure at the abandoned quarry at [\[NG 6218 2015\]](#).



Figure Strath 3.15: Winch/turntable at the intersection of the upper track and the track to the abandoned quarry at [\[NG 6186 1978\]](#). View towards the NW.



Figure Strath 3.16: Part of the quarry building infrastructure (crusher?) at [\[NG 6185 1979\]](#).



Figure Strath 3.19: Remnant of processing plant building, immediately south of the Broadford-Elgol (B8083) road at [\[NG 6198 2074\]](#).



Figure Strath 3.17: Abandoned quarry, SE of the Old Kilchrist Manse at [\[NG 6192 1977\]](#).



Figure Strath 3.20: Loading platform at the processing plant building, immediately south of the Broadford-Elgol (B8083) road at [\[NG 6198 2074\]](#).



Figure Strath 3.18: Water drainage channel of abandoned marble quarry, SE of Old Kilchrist Manse at [\[NG 6192 1977\]](#).

The processing plant is located immediately south of the Broadford-Elgol (B8083) road, adjacent to the track used to access the Marble Line Path at [\[NG 6198 2074\]](#):

Very few photographic details of the [Suardal/Kilchrist](#) quarrying activities have survived. What is available is presented in Figures Strath 3.21 – 3.25.



Figure Strath 3.21: Workers, Skye marble quarry.

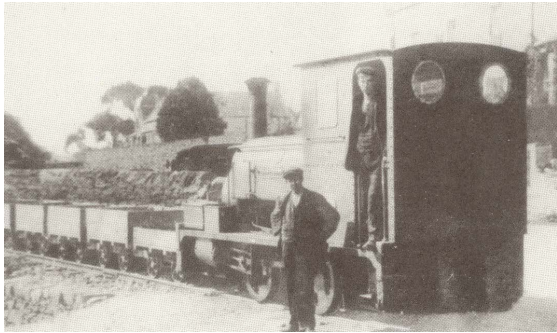


Figure Strath 3.22: Locomotive *Skylark* at Broadford Pier in 1911.

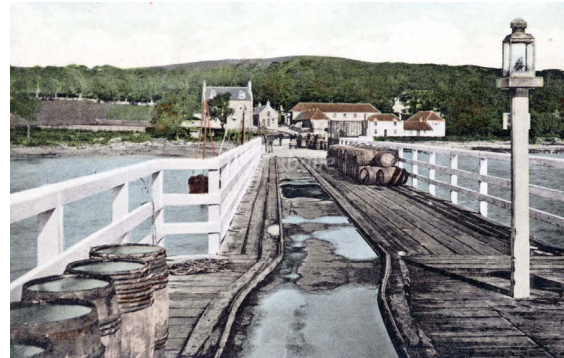


Figure Strath 3.25: Rail terminus at (old) Broadford Pier.



Figure Strath 3.23: Information board for [Suardal/Kilchrist](#) marble industry at the pedestrian bridge over the Broadford River at Broadford at [\[NG 6414 2363\]](#).



Figure Strath 3.24: Detail on information board for [Suardal/Kilchrist](#) marble industry at pedestrian bridge over the Broadford River at Broadford at [\[NG 6414 2363\]](#).

The path to [Broadford](#), the [Marble Line Path](#), utilising the line of the narrow-gauge railway, provides an easy and pleasant walk on (obviously) level ground, with excellent views towards [Beinn na Caillich](#) and [Bheinn Shuardail](#).

Return to the road at the [Cill Chriosd graveyard](#).

Continue west along the Broadford-Elgol (B8083) road for c. 5km (3 miles), to the NW side of [Torrin](#), close to the head of [Loch Slapin](#), at the abandoned quarry of [Cnoc Slapin](#).

Locality 2 [5733 2131]:



Figure Strath 3.26: Cnoc Slapin Quarry viewed towards the NE from the west side of Loch Slapin.



Figure Strath 3.27: Detail of the back wall of the Cnoc Slapin Quarry, with a dark Paleocene dolerite dyke

intruded into pale Cambro-Ordovician Durness Group dolostones.



Figure Strath 3.28: Detail of the back wall of the Cnoc Slapin Quarry, with a dark Paleocene dolerite dyke intruded into pale Cambro-Ordovician Durness Group dolostones.

Return SE towards [Broadford](#) past the (private) [entrance](#) to the [Torrin Quarry](#) and take the [Kilbride turn-off](#) at [\[NG 5936 2013\]](#). From this road, a clear view of the active quarry is available, with its extraction and processing plant. Depending upon the state of the quarry it should be possible to see exposed faces with dark dolerite dykes within the pale dolostone.

Locality 3 [\[NG 5839 2011\]](#):



Figure Strath 3.29: The Torrin Quarry, viewed towards the west from the Kilbride road.



Figure Strath 3.30: Detail of the Torrin Quarry, with dark Paleocene dolerite dyke intruded into pale Cambro-Ordovician Durness Group dolostones.



Figure Strath 3.31: Detail of the Torrin Quarry, with dark Paleocene dolerite dykes intruded into pale Cambro-Ordovician Durness Group dolostones.



Figure Strath 3.32: Detail of the Torrin Quarry, with dark Paleocene dolerite dykes intruded into pale Cambro-Ordovician Durness Group dolostones.

End of excursion.