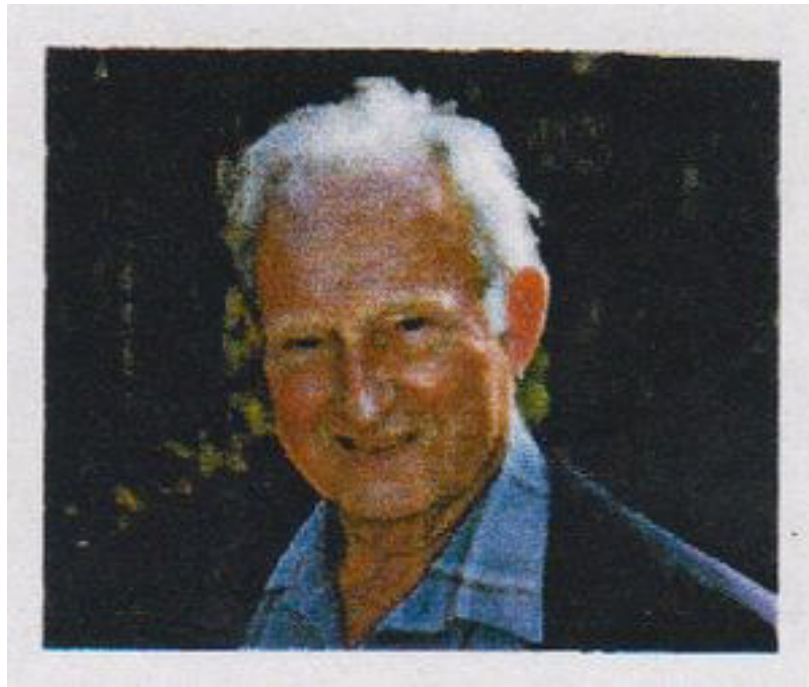


# **Wood in his Blood**

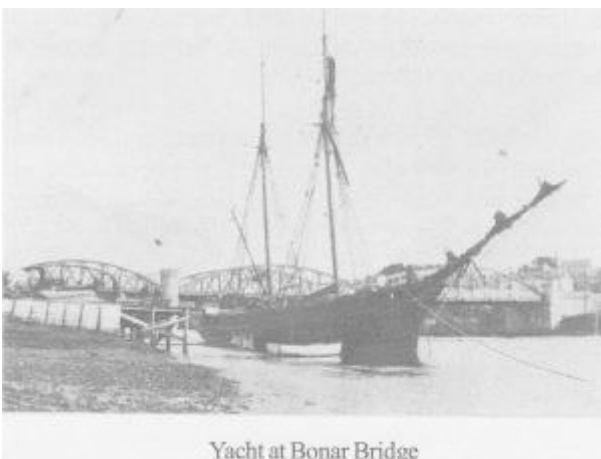
Duncan Munro's Memories

Ross and Cromarty Heritage Society is grateful to Duncan Munro's daughter, Mrs Edith Blake, for permission to reproduce *Wood in his Blood*, the account of his working life in the timber trade. All photographs are the property of the Munro and Blake families.

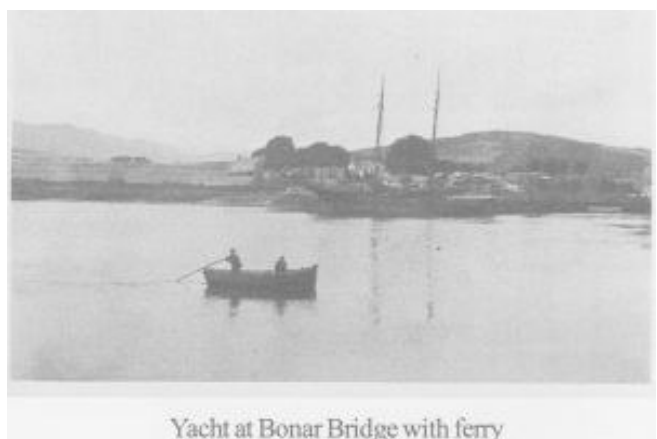
RCCHS has taken the liberty of including in the text photographs supplied by Mr and Mrs Blake which are relevant to the history, although not originally included in the book.



*Duncan Munro*



Yacht at Bonar Bridge



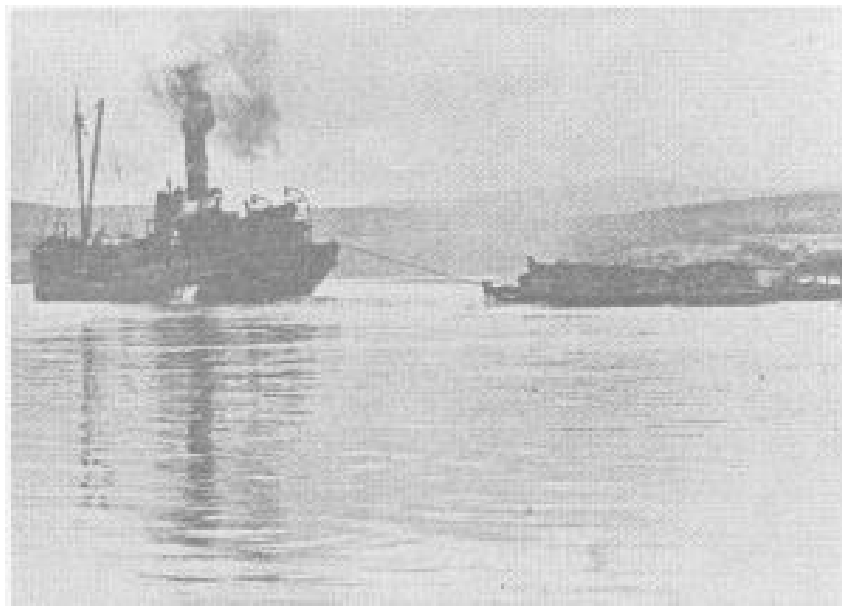
Yacht at Bonar Bridge with ferry

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## Boyhood Memories

My earliest memories were at the age of five living at Bonar Bridge, where we lived for about five years before moving to Culrain. My father had a sawmill at Rosehall which was about eight miles from Bonar Bridge. He was a very resourceful man and to get the sawn timber down to Bonar Bridge he built a wooden, flat bottomed barge which floated up to Rosehall at High Tide and came down when the tide was ebbing. The barge held about fifty tons of timber and her cargo was stacked on a pier on the seaward side of the bridge. When there was enough timber, I remember that one empty coal boat used to come to collect it. It was all mining timber and I have no doubt the boats took the timber to the nearest port to where the coal mines were.



*Coal boat and barge*

There was only one man, living in Bonar Bridge, who could pilot these ships from the sea, up the narrow channel to Bonar Bridge, by using landmarks as guides. The two ships which used to come for the wood were the Tayson and the Argentum. It was a great occasion when they arrived and it was a good opportunity for local and crofting people to make some money. I remember going into the crew's quarters and having a suck from a tin of condensed milk for which I had an insatiable desire.

One thing I remember is that my father fitted an engine in the barge, not so much to drive it upstream but to slow it down when the tide was ebbing, so that it did not go too far out in the firth.

The ships continued to come to Bonar Bridge until Mr Bethune died; as there were never charts made nobody else knew about his skill so one part of history came to an end.

## Water Transport

My father in his career as a timber merchant made use of water to cut transport costs, perhaps because his father was in the business before rail transport got going and most timber was transported by sea. I have records of correspondence to show that this was so.

Although it was before my memory of events began, I remember John Munro, a carpenter who worked for my father, telling me about a schooner which came to Bonar Bridge with a cargo of various commodities and accidentally hit the bridge and broke its mast. My father was asked to supply a tree suitable for making a new mast and, after an extensive search, he managed to find one and a new mast was made by John Munro.

What is within my memory is a barge which my father had built at Bonar Bridge. It was built by a Mr Hossack, a ship's carpenter who lived in Bonar Bridge and it was used to transport timber from Rosehall, where my father had a sawmill, to Bonar Bridge. That stretch of water is tidal and it was useful as it helped to move the barge up to and, when loaded, down to Bonar Bridge, where it was unloaded on to the pier until there was sufficient timber to make up a cargo for a steam boat. There is a photograph of one shown which had been unloaded of coal and was being loaded with timber for the coal mines.

My father had the barge fitted with an engine and propeller which was used mainly to stop it when it came to Bonar Bridge and prevent it overshooting the pier by putting the propeller in reverse.

My father used to sometimes take me to Inverinate in the West Coast where he had a sawmill, and I remember large larch logs being loaded on a Puffer, which was sitting on a dry beach. When the tide came in the Puffer could float and set off on its voyage which was usually Glasgow. One of the reasons why my father took me with him to Inverinate was that his car was a Model T Ford and, as there was a very steep hill to negotiate, he required me to put a stone behind the wheel as he had to make various races to get to the top. He had to go up in reverse gear as it was lower than any of the forward gears.



After the Second World War the timber trade was buoyant for quite a few years and my father bought all the timber on the island of Raasay, which lies between Skye and the mainland. He bought a fishing boat and converted it to carry timber which was taken to Mallaig and loaded on railway wagons for transport south.

After the article about the wood boat and the barge at Bonar Bridge appeared in the Alness and District Times, Mr Douglas Gordon, Bindal, sent this picture and information about the Argentum, one of the boats mentioned.

From Harbour Trust records information supplied by Jim Fallon. These two boats were in harbour from 30th May to 1 June 1934: Argentum 95 gross tons in inner harbour unloading 178 tons of coal; SS Edenside 147 gross tons on outer harbour loading with 156 tons of potatoes.

This was a shuttle service with horse and carts from farms delivering potatoes to SS Edenside then loading up with coal from the Argentum which continued to Bonar Bridge for the wood pit props.

[RCHS note: In her book *My Friends the Miss Boyds* the authoress Jane Duncan describes in detail the annual activity around the arrival of the coal boat at the pier in her fictitious parish in the Black Isle. The community of Ferintosh in RCHS website includes two photographs of the unloading of coal at Findon pier.]

I came across a fatal accident inquiry on SS Sterlina which lost power to its propeller on route from Bonar Bridge to Glasgow via the Caledonian canal. It drifted on to the Gizzen Briggs and a gale got up. The crew climbed up the mast and the captain tied himself to the mast, but the other two fell off in the night and, after 16 hours up there, he was rescued by fishermen from Portmahomack. A plaque was erected on the Carnegie Hall to commemorate the rescue as they had to cross a sand bar to get there.

## Grandfather Munro's part of the Story



*Andrew Munro 1840-1900*



*Balvraid Sawmill 1892. First sawmill owned by Andrew Munro. Andrew is seen, hands on hips, wearing white shirt, by building.*

My Grandfather on my father's side came from Balnaguisach, Alness, and was a sawmiller who worked as a sawmilling contractor for a Mr Paterson from Aberdeen ( a relative of Paterson, Tomich), who bought small estates and woodland stands and employed contractors like my grandfather to saw the logs they produced. The steam engine and other equipment was supplied by Mr Paterson and the setting up of the mill and employment of labour was the duty of whoever Mr Paterson employed to do the job on a basis of price for production of various sizes.



*Elsie Munro 1857-1938*

My Grandfather was sent to set up a sawmill at a village called King Edward, quite near Inverurie, and there he met Elsie Smith and they got married and started to produce a family, which ended up with two sons and nine daughters. My Grandfather was then sent, during their family producing time, to a place called Balvaird, near Dornoch, to set up a sawmill. In those days sawmill contractors were responsible for building their own homestead houses in their own time, usually after having done a day's work. When complete, the wife and family were installed and in the meantime they stayed in their previous dwellings.

My grandparents' house started off as a fairly reasonable shaped building but, as the family grew, additions were added to it. It ended up as a most peculiar place with lean-tos and all kinds of additions that made it a most grotesque building, designed to shelter thirteen people. Mr Paterson said he had never seen anything like it in all his experience!



Issued at <u>Dornoch</u>	Issued by <u>Geo. Murray</u>
Date <u>31<sup>st</sup> May 1917</u>	Rank <u>Inspector &amp; Deputy C.C.</u>
Style or Title <u>Mrs</u>	Station <u>Dornoch</u>
SURNAME <u>MUNRO</u> (In Capitals)	Date <u>31<sup>st</sup> May 1917</u>
Christian Names <u>Elsie B.</u>	
Postal Address <u>Balvraid House</u> <u>Dornoch, Sutherland</u>	
Signature of Holder	
	<p><b>CONDITIONS.</b></p> <p>Where it is convenient to procure a Photograph, the Police Officer will fill in Personal Description of the holder, but the Pass being the Pass should procure and affix one with as little delay as possible.</p> <p><b>H. CHISHOLM,</b> Chief Constable of Sutherland.</p> <p>Certified that <u>Mrs E. B. Munro</u> has been ordinarily Resident in the COUNTY OF SUTHERLAND since 11th August 1914.</p> <p><b>H. CHISHOLM, C.C.</b></p>
	Personal Description.
	Height <u>5</u> feet <u>3</u> inches.
	Sex <u>Female</u>
	Build <u>Proportionate</u>
	Complexion <u>Old</u>
Eye Colour <u>Blue</u>	
Other Particulars <u>Wears glasses</u>	
Issued by <u>GM</u>	

*This is a travel pass issued to Elsie Munro in 1917, probably required for business travel since it was the time of the First World War.*

In 1892 my Grandfather bought the sawmill at Balvaird from Mr Paterson. It was not long afterwards that he died and my Grandmother took over the business. Luckily, times took a turn for the better and she prospered. She was a very extravagant woman. One of the things she did was to build a large house between the Pole and Dornoch and she called it Balvraid House.



*Balvraid House*

## My Pal Bert

Bert Inkster was the son of a Farm Manager who managed Reilig Farm, near Inverness, for Colonel Fraser who owned Reilig Estate.

My father bought a stand of good quality Douglas Fir from him in 1936. There was an estate sawmill and Colonel Fraser at that time decided to stop operating it. The upshot was that my father bought the steam engine, which was very convenient for him as the estate sawmill was only a few hundred yards away. When the mill was set up with the steam engine in place, my father was approached by a fifteen-year-old boy who said he would like the job of being the fireman of the steam engine. My father was somewhat surprised at this request from such a young lad and asked him if he had sufficient experience for the job. The boy, who was named Bert Inkster, told him that the school was quite near the estate sawmill and after school each day he would go to the engine room and, after becoming a friend of the fireman, was taught how to operate the engine and eventually took control while the fireman took his rest. On very many occasions he was up early and had the engine fire going before the fireman came in.

My father was impressed but, before he employed Bert, he sought out the old fireman who told him Bert would be an excellent fireman. And so my father employed him on condition that he would always have to keep up a good head of steam as the mill was operated by a sawmiller who was paid by what he produced.

Bert started work and did an excellent job. When the timber was finished, about eighteen months later, my father had purchased another stand of timber at Golspie, in Sutherland, and Bert was asked if he would go there. He was to live in a bothy with another man who was in charge of the horses. Bert agreed to this offer and the engine and mill, plus enough timber to put in the foundations for the benches, set off for Golspie.

The bothies were quickly put up and a stable built for the horses, these being the first requirements. Then the engine was set at a place where there was enough water to supply it, and a barrel put below the engine that the water was fed into. Bert then filled the boiler with water and after that he felled trees around and about with an axe. He chopped up branches and carried them to the engine. When the branches were laid on the floor he lit the boiler fire and very soon the steam rose and the saws could be operated. The first thing was to cut timber for the roof and then production started. The whole operation took about a week.

Once the mill was going, a rough shed was built beside the engine room which contained plenty of sawdust and the sawdust shovel. This was the toilet and, when any of the workers required a 'major job', he put sawdust on the shovel before and after, went into the engine room where the fireman, with a bow, opened the firebox door and all was thrown into the white hot flames and disposed of immediately!

When my father went out of business Bert came to work for me, driving a lorry. I have never known a better driver, sharp, quick in an emergency, and I never heard him refuse to do a dangerous job.

Bert and I were about the same age and we both retired about the same time. One day I asked Bert if he would come with me to France to visit my daughter, who was married to Eric Black, a footballer who used to play for Aberdeen but then played for Metz, a football team in France. Without hesitation Bert said yes and we set off by car and, after arriving in Metz, we discovered that

my daughter and Eric had been inadvertently invaded by uninvited guests. Bert and I decided to make up the time till the guests left by going on a trip through Germany and down by the Rhine and Moselle valleys and had a most enjoyable time. We parked the car in the evenings and enjoyed the beautiful wines of those valleys. Afterwards we went back to Metz to see Eric and Karina and in all it was a most enjoyable holiday.

## The Start of my Own Business - Beauly Sawmill

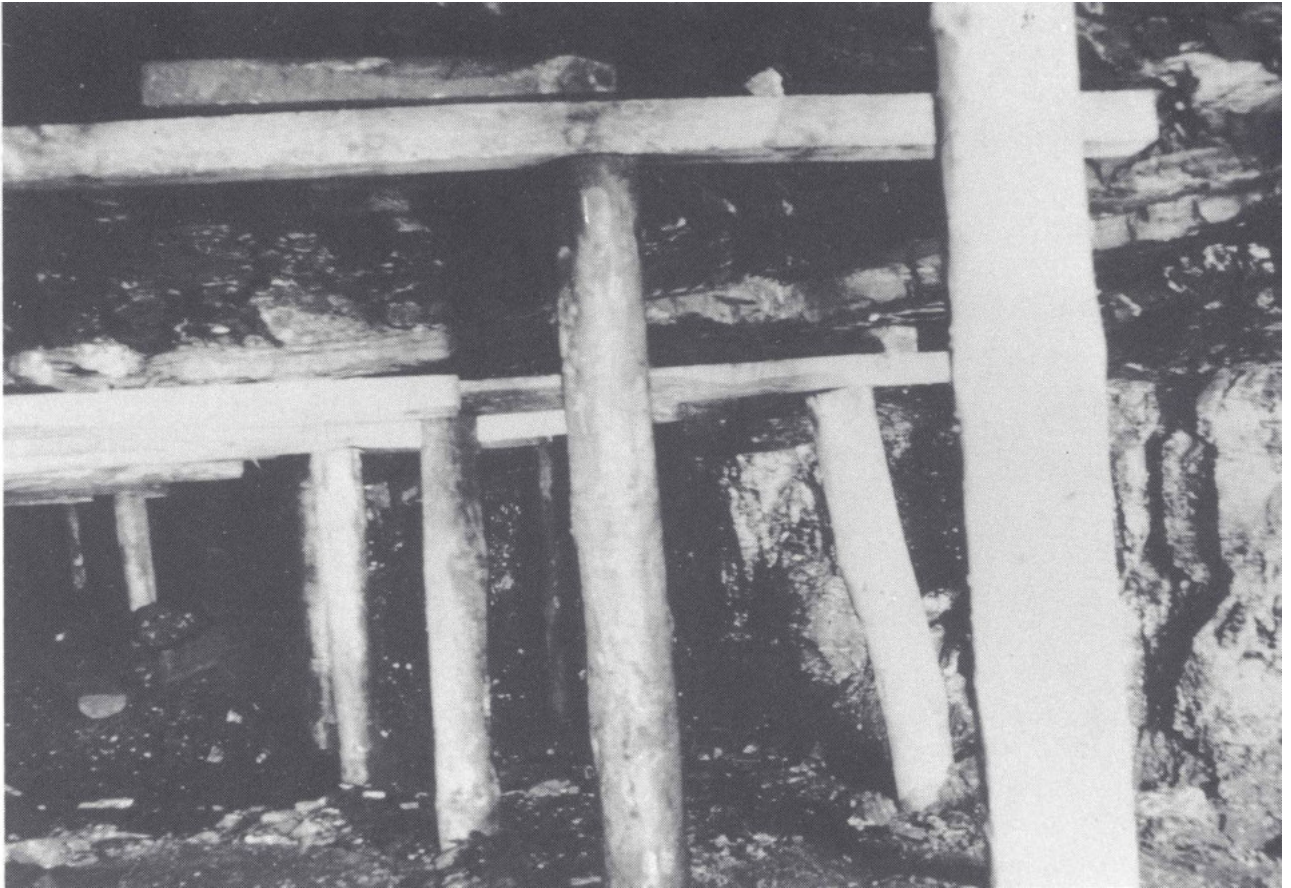
In the year 1947 I made a deal with my father to buy a sawmill and about 200 acres of timber near Beauly which was not operating profitably owing to several factors.

My first task was changing large sawmill equipment with smaller equipment. Machinery which could be easily removed from one site to another according to distance from the trees as they were felled, and the ability of the horses to keep the mill going in logs.

This involved making roads to allow a four-wheel drive lorry to move the sawn timber and to put it into railway wagons at Beauly Railway Station, as nearly all the timber was for the coal mines and went into wagons which had been emptied, and the Railway Company gave very economic rates for this business.



*Dave Murray and Coinneach (Kenneth) Laing with load of pit props.*



*Pit props in situ.*

## Bonus Scheme

Soon after I started business on my own account at a place called Struy on the road from Beauly to Cannich, I was sitting on a log not far from my sawmill, which was situated in the middle of the wood. All my workers were paid on an hourly basis and as I was a believer in payment by results, I started to think of how I could involve my workers in some sort of scheme which would allow them to make some extra money. Such schemes have to be well thought out and, after several days' consideration, I decided to give the two millers one farthing (0.025p) per cubic foot over their wages on every cubic foot despatched from the mill. We were cutting mainly mining timber for the National Coal Board. At this point I would like to explain certain things about mining timber. A large amount of bark was allowed and sizes so numerous that a good miller could save his employer a lot of money by taking advantage of what he could get away with. This is one factor in why the price was so low.

My millers soon learned this and found it was to their advantage as well as mine to take the opportunity to get as much sawn timber out of the logs as possible. This reduced the workload of the man who was employed in barrowing away the waste slabs and allowed him to do other jobs, so I decided to give him a farthing as encouragement which I am glad to say it did. The man who kept the records of despatches also wanted to become involved in the scheme. I told him that if he was prepared to assist in other various jobs over a period, and would continue to do so, I would let him participate in the scheme, but I would be watching him. I must say that his extra effort justified his inclusion and after a trial period I included him.

The scheme worked very well with variations when different circumstances arose and I have no doubt it led to my prosperity more than it would have done without it. The monthly despatches averaged 9000 cubic feet. I also found that the mill squad took a much greater interest in my business and required much less supervision which allowed me to devote more time to getting customers.

[Note: 9000 cu ft x 0.025p = a monthly bonus of £25 per worker, a not inconsiderable amount in 1947]

At the time the bonus scheme started (1947), the price of mining timber was Government controlled at three shillings per cubic metre delivered to the mines, and the workers' wages were an average of two shillings and sixpence per hour (25p), so that an increase of one farthing per cubic metre was not to be sneezed at.

The mill was kept supplied with logs by three horses and when the trees got too far away from the mill it was practical to move the mill nearer to the trees. The mill squad were very proficient in doing this as they did not like to be short of logs; a shortage would hit their production of sawn timber and consequently their bonus earnings.

The sawmill squad consisted of a Slabber whose job it was to make the logs manageable for finishing off by the Miller. The Slabber's assistant is called a Tailsman and the Miller's a Picker. One man was required for barrowing away waste slabs and stacking sawn timber, while another man was required for time sheets and recording despatches.

All mining timber was delivered by rail by L.M.S. (London Midland & Scottish Railway) who gave very good rates as they had a large number of empty wagons returning to the coal mines which had been unloaded of coal at various stations, and it was better for them to give very low rates than to return them empty.

I must say the bonus schemes worked well for many years until my whole system of production changed with the introduction of modern machinery.

## History of Dingwall Sawmill

When the First World War broke out sawn timber, which had mainly been imported from abroad, became very scarce as shipping was too valuable to be used for transporting timber. Timber workers had to be taken from America and the British colonies to cut down our own forests. After the war, the Government set up the Forestry Commission with power to requisition land so that an adequate supply of timber would be available in any future emergency. Unfortunately the Second World War broke out and all the remaining timber was felled. After the Second World War efforts were redoubled to make up the shortfall and at the present time there is a fairly large amount of timber, although not enough to supply all our needs. Perhaps the percentage from our own forests supplied about 10-15% of our requirements.

When I finished the wood at Struy, I moved to the Dingwall area where I bought two lots of timber from Mr P W McCallum of Lemlair. They were situated above Woodlands Farm on his estate and kept me going for about eighteen months. In the meantime I was looking about for more timber and eventually made a deal for a fairly large stand on Tulloch Hill from Colonel Vickers who owned Tulloch Estate. I made roads down each side of it and bought a piece of land near Dochcarty Farm and set up my sawmill. It was a disastrous decision as the small River Peffery, which it was beside, became flooded and in spite of all efforts to keep the water out, the site had to be abandoned. I went to see Colonel Vickers who was very sympathetic and offered me a site on higher ground if I could see my way to pay him the full cost of the wood instead of the normal terms of four instalments. He said he had a debt which he was anxious to get rid of. I went to my banker who treated me favourably and at once it allowed me to get a seven acre site on a higher level beside a main road. There was one snag, however; the site was too high for the Dingwall water supply, which came from Loch Ussie. Nevertheless, when the main draught of water was reduced at night it was able to flow into my land, so I got a tank to hold the water at night and with an electric pump was able to supply the houses which I had built for my forestry workers. Some years later the water from Loch Glass was tapped, creating an abundant supply. The Loch Glass water opened up a very large area for housing around the sawmill and as the town of Dingwall increased its boundary the sawmill began to be looked upon as out of place and over the years attempts were made to have it removed, without success.

When I finished the Tulloch Hill wood, I started buying timber within a reasonable distance from the sawmill from local estates and the Forestry Commission, mainly softwood. I gradually became interested in hardwoods and bought a bandsaw with a log carriage. This involved me in buying saw maintenance equipment and getting people trained to maintain the saws.

I found that this was a wise decision and managed to get a long-standing order for beech sawn 'through and through', i.e. with the bandsaw; this way of sawing was less wasteful than other methods of timber conversion. This new method of timber conversion for me opened new doors, inasmuch as I could buy large trees and convert them to sawn timber without difficulty. It was due to my operating bandsaws that I became involved with the boat building timbers which I have described in another chapter.

When I settled down more or less permanently in Dingwall, I came in contact with the estate owners and became friendly with them. Perhaps the one I got on best with was Lord Cromarty, who owned Castle Leod Estate. I remember him once asking me to deal with a huge branch of a Spanish chestnut tree, which had broken off in a gale. It was a very old and historic tree which had



been planted by one of his ancestors in the fifteenth century. Spanish chestnut is not very common in this country. It grows to a great age but is very susceptible to 'ring shake' which makes it worthless when sawn. If it is sound and free of 'shake', it is very valuable and as it is almost indistinguishable from oak, it is used a lot in churches, as it is easily dried and soft to carve. Wood carvers are keen to procure it and there is a very good export market for it, especially to Germany. Lord Cromartie wanted me to cut the branch into small slithers about two inches long by one inch wide by one eighth thick on which he would write his signature and then give to a party of Mackenzies from America and Canada as a keepsake, as he was the chief of the Mackenzie clan. He told me that there were over eight million Mackenzies scattered around the world. One another occasion he asked me to come to Castle Leod to view some trees he wanted to remove. As we were looking at the trees, we could see some distance away a tall man with a game bag on his back and a dog at his heel. Lord Cromartie said it was 'Jock the Glen' who lived alone in a small cottage well up in the hills and was employed by Lord Cromartie to look after a flock of sheep. Lord Cromartie was in the habit of going up to Jock's cottage about twice a year. The previous year when he had gone, he suggested to Jock that he would put a water supply in, a bath, WC and other requirements needed for modern living. Jock was non-committal. Lord Cromartie ordered the plumbing to be done and six months later went up again to Jock's cottage to find all the work done but unused. On asking Jock why he did not use any of the facilities, Jock replied, "You would have been far better spending your money on repairing the fank". ['fank' in simple terms was an outdoor bath for dipping sheep in order to remove parasites]



*Two photos of tree felling at Castle Leod (not necessarily relating to this account).*



*Two photos of tree felling at Castle Leod (not necessarily relating to this account).*

I also had a good relationship with other lairds such as John Mackenzie of Gairloch, Captain Andrew Matheson of Brahan, Captain Patrick Munro of Foulis, and Mr Munro-Ferguson of Novar. All of them would help me if I needed special logs. These estates were the nearest to my sawmill, but I had dealings with others who were further afield, in the Black Isle and Inverness-shire and sometimes further, if I was looking for special timber such as larch for boatskins which was scarce.



*Sawmill staff. Back row, l-r: Angus Macaskill, Jimmy Mackay, George Mackay, George Darling, Harry Cassie, William Matheson, (unknown), Duncan Munro (owner), George Munro, Bob Macleod, Charlie Reid, Jimmy Fraser, Tom Grantsfield, Cameron Mackay. Front row, l-r: (unknown), Donnie Robertson, Bert Inkster, Peter Macallister, Ralph Angus, (unknown), (unknown).*

## Use of Waste

I am not sure when the first chipboard factory was built but it certainly started a revolution in the timber trade. Instead of burning and giving away slabs, waste timber was turned into chips and sold to a chipboard factory called Caberboard, based in Stirling. There was also a ready market for bark and the difference between peeled and unpeeled chips made it profitable to peel the logs and sell the bark for horticultural and various other uses. This created a tremendous change in the timber trade, and reduced the waste factor to practically nil. Sawdust was also much in demand at a very economic price and sawmills became very tidy places and more or less like factories compared to what they had been previously. The revolution also benefited the timber grower and now there are factories all over the country buying direct from woodland estates. The peeling of mill logs helped to increase the output of sawmills as in many cases the bark contained grit which made the saws dull and it became necessary to change the saws frequently.

A new project is now afoot which has already started in Northern Ireland which involves the reducing of useless trees to pellets and then using them as fuel for boilers to produce electricity. This will use low grade timber which was previously used for mining, which is no use for anything now that coal mining is almost a thing of the past. Such a project is in the process of being built at Invergordon by the same firm which started the project in Northern Ireland.

## Oak for Ship Building - Herd and Mackenzie

Oak is an indigenous species of Scottish timber and for quite a few years I used to sell what came my way, through an agent, to a firm in Aberdeen-shire who milled it and sold the sawn products to boat builders on the coast for building herring boats. The Highlands had not been over-exploited and there was usually good quality wood to be had.

One day, as I was sitting in my office, I was visited by a man who introduced himself as John Clark, manager of a large boat building firm in Buckie. He told me that he had been up in Lochinver assessing the damage done to a fishing boat with a view to giving a price for repairing it.

Mr Clark told me that when he was returning from Lochinver he noticed a lorry at Lairg loaded with very good quality oak logs. He spoke to the driver of the lorry who told him that he had loaded them at my sawmill in Dingwall the previous day and had returned to his headquarters in Lairg to have something done to his lorry. The logs were to be delivered to a firm in Aberdeen.

Mr Clark told me that his firm were having difficulties in getting sawn oak. I asked him if he would like to have a look round my sawmill and yard. He said he would like to do so. While we were walking round the log yard his eye was caught by a large oak log about 18 ft long by about 40 inches in diameter. He examined the log closely and said it would make a fine sternpost of which they were in urgent need. I suggested that since he was at the mill, we could saw it to the required size under his supervision, to which he readily agreed. The log was soon put on the bandsaw carriage and the miller did the conversion under Mr Clark's direction very quickly, and it was delivered next day to Buckie. This was the start of a very profitable and amicable relationship, which lasted for many years.

There was only one snag in this new working relationship, however, and that was that the length I could saw was limited to 22 feet. John Clark told me that if I could increase the length to 40 feet, he could give me more orders for longer lengths of oak and larch boatskins. I was keen to get this business started and decided to get a quote for a new one, which I found to be prohibitive. An idea came to me that if I got one similar to the one I had, I could join them up and solve the problem, so I put an advert in the Timber Trades Journal for a carriage of the same make and size as mine. I did not have much hope of getting a reply, but several days after it appeared in the Journal, I received a telephone call from a firm in Cirencester who told me that they had a carriage for sale, similar to mine.

I told the caller I would like him to check on several vital measurements and, if they tallied, I would travel down and see the carriage. He phoned me soon after with the measurements and they tallied with mine, so I told him I would fly down. I booked a flight to Gloucester Airport and the man I had spoken to said he would meet me and take me to where the carriage was, which was not far from the airport. I duly flew down a few days later and I knew that if I could conclude the deal, I might return home the same day. The carriage proved to be identical to mine and had been well stored and greased all over to prevent rust. So I made a deal with him quickly and he took me back to the airport where I was just in time to get a flight home. A friend of mine, who had a haulage business in the Black Isle, had a load of potatoes going to a place near Cirencester and he took the carriage up to Dingwall on his return journey.

I soon got a local engineer to join up the two carriages, which proved a great success and allowed me to undertake the conversion of logs up to 45 feet in length so that I got many more orders from Herd and Mackenzie and also from Fish Farmers who required long lengths of Douglas Fir.

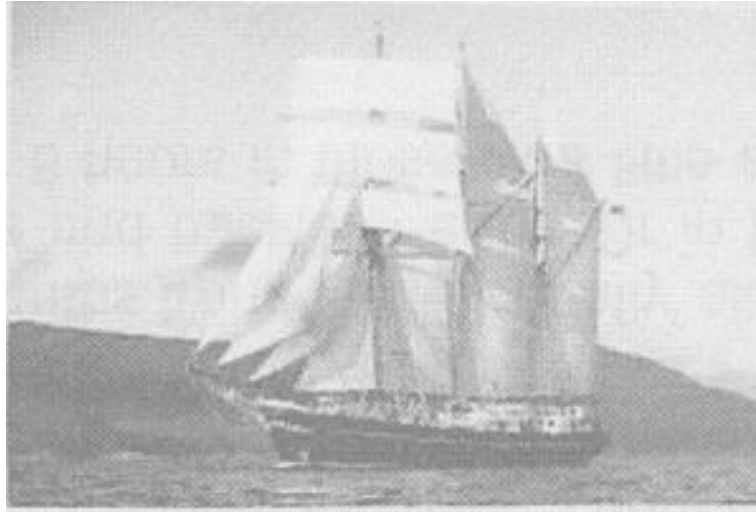


*Oak keels before ....*



..... and after.

## The Captain Scott



*The Captain Scott*

I received a telephone call from John Clark of Herd and Mackenzie, ship builders of Buckie. They had just received confirmation of an order for a large schooner from the Dulverton Trust and a great amount of large, dimensional oak and best quality larch would be required. He thought it advisable to give me early information to give me a chance to look around for the type of timber and sizes they would require.

After getting a list of the sizes required, I went to various woodland estates. I was very glad that they thought the building was a good project, as it was devised for the training of young people in seamanship and character building. In many cases they released trees that they would not otherwise have done.

I have found in my search for oak and large that getting the right size and quality of larch was the most difficult to procure. After all, the logs had to be 40ft and over in length, and straight with one sweep allowed. They also had to be close grained and more or less free from knots. However, after a lot of searching I found enough in some outlandish places, including Applecross. There I found plantations which contained about forty larch trees of the required quality and, after negotiation, bought them. The snag was that they had to be transported over the perilous hairpin bends called the Bealach nam Bo (Pass of the Cattle), which only the lorry drivers with nerves of steel would venture. I envisaged having to float them round the coast to avoid the Bealach bends, which would have been costly. I was very lucky to have an excellent lorry driver, Bert Inkster, who was more than an employee, being also a good friend of long standing. We discussed the problem of the Bealach and decided to try a plan by putting short logs up to the roof height of the lorry and then putting several of the long boat logs over the roof. This we did and Bert set off for Dingwall. I do not know another driver who would undertake to do this.

When Bert came to the Bealach hairpin bends, he had to reverse several times at each turn, and the last was impossible because the logs were up against the rocks. Bert, however, was not beat, he braked, put on the handbrake and got out and loosened the chains of the lorry which were holding the logs, and then reversed the lorry until he had room to turn. He then tightened the chains and set off for Dingwall.



This was how Bert transported all the logs to the mill from Applecross. Soon the press got to hear of the operation and The Scotsman published an article (see below).

I am glad to say that I supplied all the oak and larch timbers for the schooner, which was named the Captain Scott, and all credit goes to the woodland owners in the area who so wholeheartedly supported the project by releasing their best timber.



*Tackling the Bealach*

### **‘Long, long trail to the boatyard’ by Anthony Pledger. Article written in The Scotsman newspaper.**

Boatskin larch is scarce in Scotland today and boat builders are depending on timber merchants to find the remaining forests and enable the building of fishing boats to go on unhindered until more recently planted timber has had time to mature.

One of the few places providing larch is the Applecross Estate in one of the remotest parts of Wester Ross, and the problem of removing it to the mill is

formidable as the timber has to be taken by lorry over the tortuous 2,054 foot high Bealach nam Bo - The Pass of the Cattle.

Mr Duncan Munro, sawmiller of Dingwall, depended on the driving skill of one of his employees, Mr Robert Inkster, of Evanton, to bring the 40 to 50 foot long loads across the pass, negotiating several hairpin bends during the journey.

Mr Inkster said, "It was a tricky job and I had to do two or three shunts in places to get the load round the bends but I always managed all right."

He had to make about thirty trips to remove all the timber and he hoped to accomplish that before winter, as the pass was sometimes closed in bad weather.

The major requirement was for straight-grown larch, but oak and ash were also being removed from Applecross and were being supplied to the Buckie boatyard of Herd and Mackenzie, who were building the £200,000 three-masted schooner - The Captain Scott - for the Dulverton Trust.

Between 1895 and the Second World War little deciduous larch was planted on private estates in the North because of uncertainty over foreign imports. This created a shortage.

A boatyard spokesman said at the time, "The situation is that those who previously grew larch did not replant to any great extent and the reserve is very low in Scotland at the moment. We know there are pockets of it in a few places but, generally speaking, Scotland is almost denuded of larch. We have been very fortunate so far and haven't been held up."

Forestry on Applecross Estate was managed by Mr Jack Evans, of Messrs Bingham, Hughes and Macpherson, Inverness land agents. Mr Evans said at the time that the estate's present wooded acreage of 412 was being increased by 70 acres a year with lodge pole pine, Sitka spruce, Scots pine and larch.

Footnote: The 320 ton Dulverton Trust schooner was expected to be ready for trials in a year's time from this article being written, before starting adventure training cruises from Plockton.



*Boat builders at work on a vessel. Keel supplied by Dingwall Sawmill?*

## 80ft Keel for Boat

I received a request in one of my conversations with John Clark of Herd & Mackenzie, Boat Builders, Buckie, that they had an order from a skipper for an 80ft boat, but he insisted on having the keel in two sections which meant two pieces at least 40ft long, each section 18 inches by 12 inches. I told John that he was joking and he laughed but told me to look around anyway.

When I am driving around the countryside I always keep my eyes open, not only nearby but at a distance, and I have often been surprised at what I have come across at long range. Such a thing happened in the Black Isle as I was driving near Avoch, and in the distance at the rear of Rosskill Farm I espied two oak trees. I decided to take a closer look and when I got to them I found they were two of the best oaks I have ever seen and would do for the keel sections. I sought out the owner, Mr Grant of Rosskill Farm. After discussing with him a generous price, he decided to let me have one tree. I was determined to get another suitable tree and I tried most of the woodland estates around, without success, so I decided to try Mr Grant for his other tree. He was reluctant to part with it but eventually money won the day and he let me have it.

The next step was the felling which had to be done skilfully to prevent damaging the main parts of the trees. They both came down sound and were free of any defects. The butt logs both measured 43ft and I had to hire a long, heavy lorry and a powerful crane to lift them. We sawed them and laid the two pieces, each 43ft x 18in x 12in, in front of my office. I then phoned John that they were ready and within two hours he was in my yard with Mr Mackenzie, the owner of the firm. They were quite delighted and surprised to see the two beautiful keel sections.

There is an unwritten law that the supplier of the keel of a boat gets to supply the other sections which are easier to produce, so it is to the advantage of the wood merchant to supply the keel of a boat.



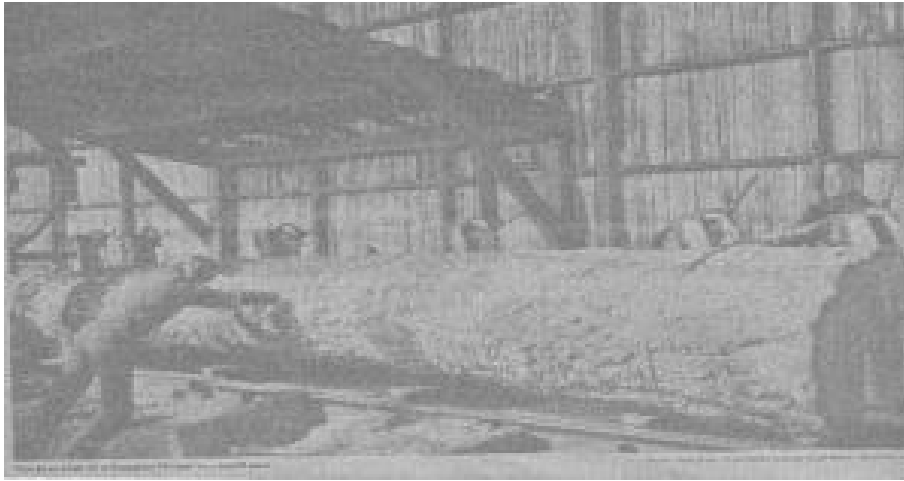
*Keel timber at Dingwall.*

## Conversion of Big Douglas Fir Logs

In July 1965 I received a request from the Forestry Commission to mill 20 Douglas Fir logs which were 40ft long and had to be sawn firstly into 20in x 20in square and then to make them octagonal.

The object was to make a floating dock to avoid paying harbour dues and were ordered by an oil company in Shetland. By making them octagonal they could put old car tyres side by side to create a buffer. The logs required had to be very large and straight and could only be supplied by the Forestry Commission from a conserved forest at Reelig, near Inverness.

Firstly the trees had to be selected and those which were dead straight and with enough girth could meet requirements. After the trees were felled they had to be cross cut at four feet from the butt and skidded to a place where they could be loaded on lorries and afterwards transported to my sawmill at Dingwall where they were converted to the required specification.



The photos show the logs being loaded and converted and loaded, when sawn, onto a lorry, the illustration being more illuminating than written descriptions.

Unless I am mistaken, my sawmill in Dingwall was the only one in Scotland which could have undertaken to do this job.

## The Bridge Over The River Kerry

1974 was the year that an American engineering firm called Brown & Root started to build an oil platform at Nigg with a view to extracting oil from under the North Sea. The platform was constructed on top of a large barge and was successfully anchored to the seabed and christened 'Highland One'. The barge was returned to Nigg and, after inspection by Lloyds of London, was allowed to transport another platform to the North Sea. However, the second platform, which was called 'Highland Two', was shorter than its predecessor and the barge had to be reduced in length by 16ft; it was 16ft in diameter and 1½in thick.

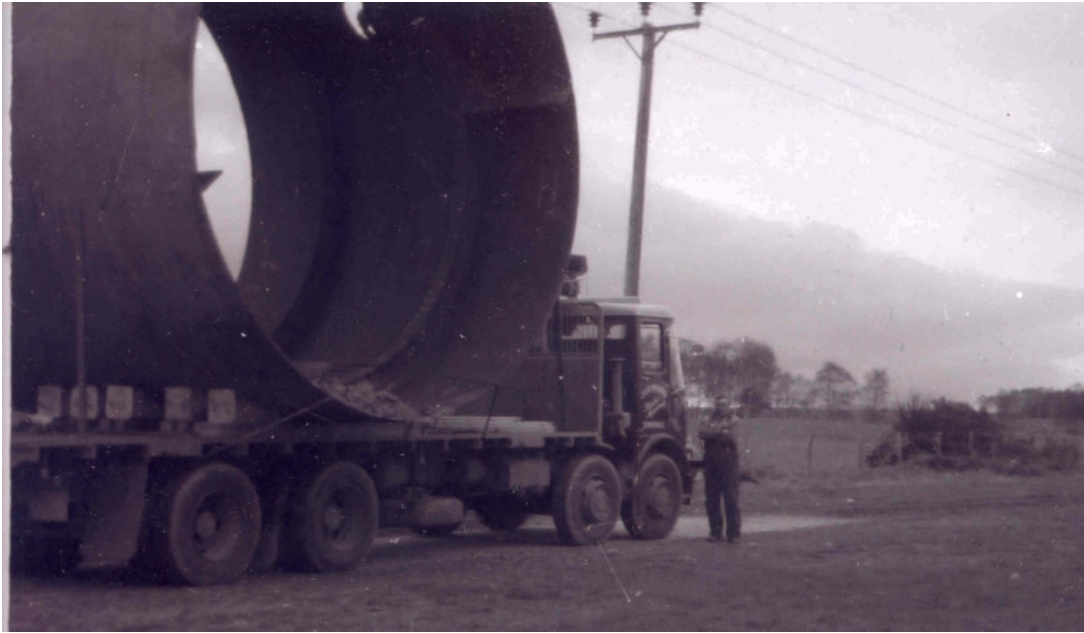
This operation coincided with a deal I was endeavouring to make with Mr Mackenzie of Gairloch for a large stand of timber situated on the right side of the road going to Gairloch. On the left was the River Kerry, about six miles from Gairloch village. There was one condition involved: that the buyer of the timber on the right side of the road had to purchase a mature stand of timber on the other side of the River Kerry. The Kerry is a fast flowing river running down a steep gorge. At first I thought that making a crossing over the river would be an impossible proposition, but after examination I discovered two ledges, one on either side of the river, which were comparatively level and sixteen feet apart. This made me think that if I had sixteen foot steel arches the space could possibly be bridged.

I remembered the piece of 16ft pipe at Nigg, which I thought might do the job, so I contacted Brown & Root who were agreeable to deal with me but said that the Customs and Excise Department had to be consulted as the pipe was too large to be classed as scrap metal and that if I came to an agreement with Customs and Excise they would sell me the pipe. After negotiations with Customs and Excise, who were paid £450 duty, and Brown & Root who were paid £200, the pipe was mine.



I arranged for the pipe to be loaded onto my lorry and, with a police escort, it set out for Dingwall. All went well until we arrived at the approach gates to Calrossie when the top of the pipe struck an overhead electricity cable and, I understand, fused a large part of Easter Ross. The police escort, under the instructions of Inspector Rhoden, stopped the lorry, which was eventually moved to a lay-by to allow traffic to flow. I was considering what to do about it; naturally I was anxious to get the lorry in use again. By sheer coincidence we spotted a large mobile crane coming towards us about a mile away. I quickly asked Inspector Rhoden if he would stop it and, as he was a friend of mine, he agreed to do so. The driver of the crane was quite surprised at being stopped and Inspector Rhoden explained to him that I would like him to lift the pipe off the lorry. At first he refused to do this without the instruction of his employer; however, Inspector Rhoden explained to the driver that he could be assured that his employer would be well compensated and he would vouch for my good character. This seemed to sway the driver and in a very short time he had unloaded the pipe from my lorry, had sat it endwise at the roadside and had continued his journey. I telephoned the driver's employer, explained the full position and we came to a very satisfactory financial arrangement.





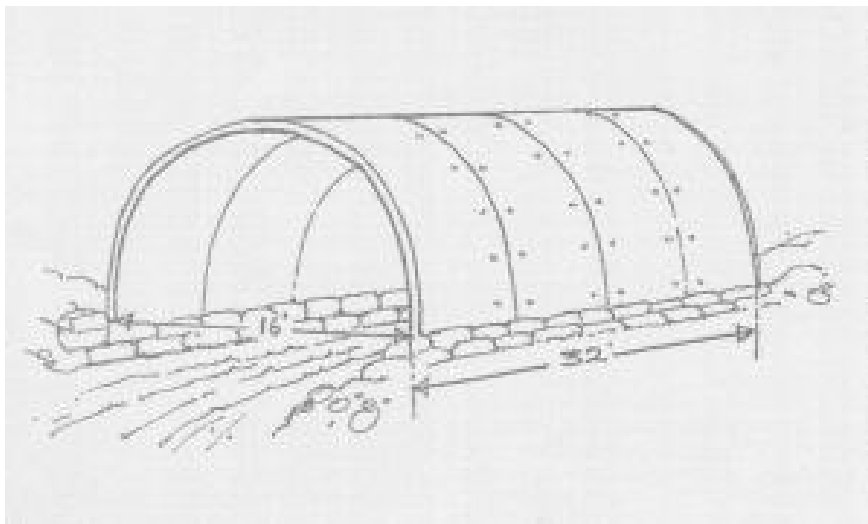
*Oops!*

The following day I contacted a man who was known as 'Colorado Joe' who had a converted car which contained metal cutting equipment. I arranged with him to cut the pipe into suitable sections for my job, which he did; then I had no difficulty transporting the sections to my sawmill at Dingwall. I spent some time fitting them with hooks and holes for the plan I had in mind.



*Back on track for Dingwall.*

The next part of the operation was the procuring of 200 hessian bags about 18in x 12in in size, which we filled with a dry mix of cement and sand and sewed the tops to keep the mix from spilling. After this we set off for Gairloch with all the bits and pieces and a large 4 x 4 ex-military converted crane as well. When we got to where we intended to make the crossing we laid the cement bags on both ledges and levelled them. We then lowered the military crane into the riverbed with the aid of a timber skidder (a powerful machine for hauling timber). With the crane we lifted the pipe sections onto the cement and sand filled bags and bolted them together, giving us an arch 32ft long (see illustration). We then pulled the crane out of the riverbed with the skidder and set off for home.



It had been a long day. On the way home we stopped at a pub and I spotted a bottle of McAllan Glenlivet whisky distilled in 1937. I asked the pub owner if I could purchase the bottle, to which he agreed but said it was a very rare and expensive whisky. Nevertheless, I said I wanted it and several glasses. Needless to say, we drank the whole bottle; it helped to revive our spirits after the long, hard day we had, and then we continued our journey home.

The next phase was to open a quarry near the crossing and bring the bridge to the correct level. As the arch was well below the level of the main road a large amount of fill was required. By opening the quarry and gathering everything else nearby we eventually got enough, but there's still one steep nip that took every ounce of the lorry's power to climb.

The crossing allowed us to extract some of the finest timber I have ever seen, mainly Douglas Fir. To my knowledge the bridge is still there and, I hope, is proving useful to Mr John Mackenzie of Gairloch.