

Dingwall and the Dams 1943-61

Hydro Electricity in the Conon River Basin

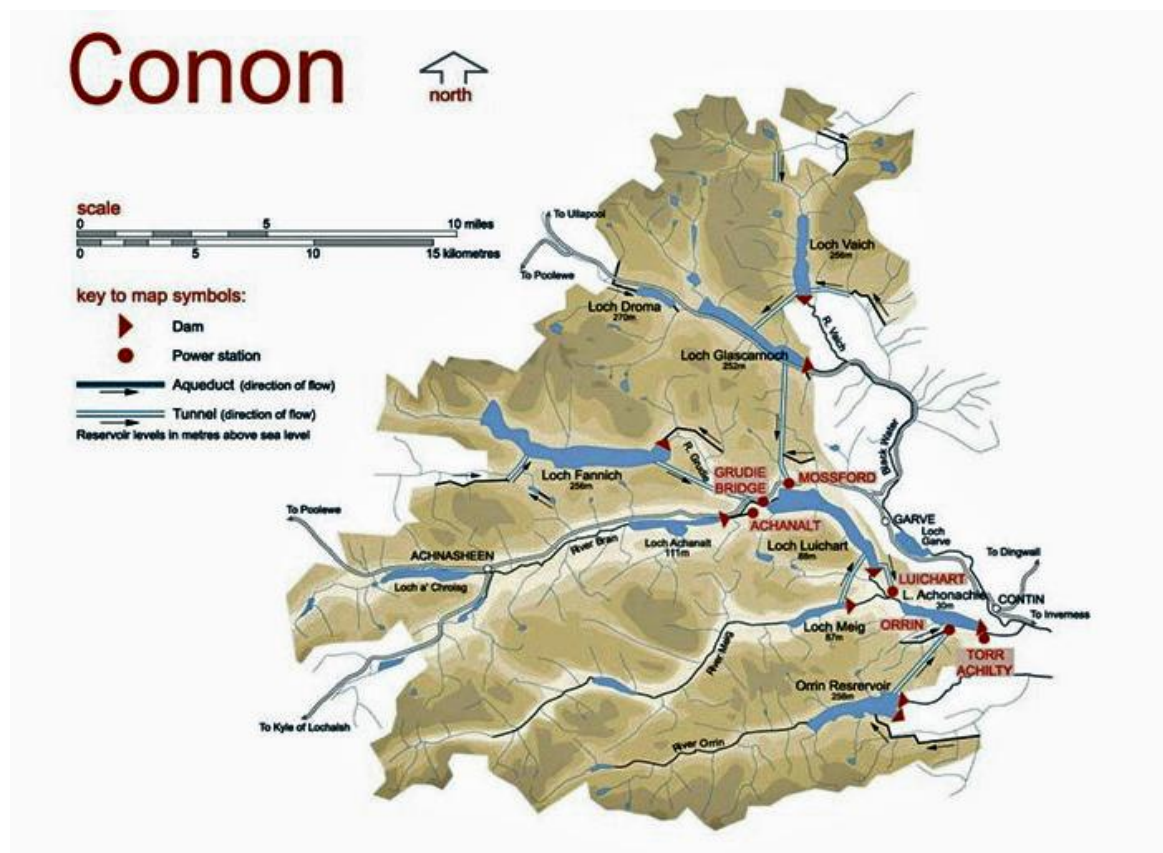
by Forbes Munro for Dingwall Museum

Dingwall and Mid-Ross recovered quickly from the Second World War. The local economy and services were under strain. The nation was financially broke. But memories of failings after 1918 had encouraged forward planning by the war-time coalition government. One initiative significantly influenced the Dingwall area.

In 1943, a North of Scotland Hydro Electric Board came into being with a remit to construct hydroelectric schemes in the Highlands and distribute the power. The Board was the brainchild of Tom Johnson, the Secretary of State for Scotland.

Hydro electricity was not a recent technology. In the Dingwall area, local estate owners had attempted small experiments – notably at the Orrin Falls in the 1890s, and Loch Luichart in the 1920s. But large-scale adoption in Norway highlighted what could be achieved in similar terrain.

In 1946 the Hydro Board began an ambitious scheme to convert the whole of the Conon River basin into one large electricity-producing area. The project embraced the Conon, its two main tributaries - the Blackwater and the Orrin - and associated lochs. When it was completed in 1961 it comprised seven dams, seven power stations, 20 miles of tunnels, 15 miles of aqueducts, and an array of fish-ladders. It was the largest infrastructure investment in Ross since the Victorian railways.



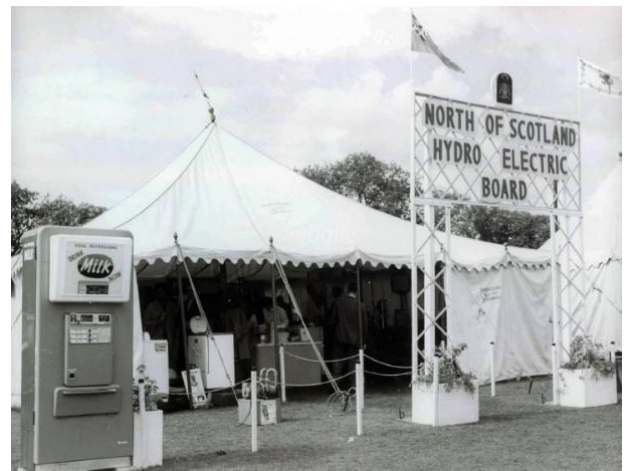
The Hydro Board located the head office for its entire northern area in Dingwall and improved the regularity and costs of supply of electricity to the town. Dingwall's gains also came through expenditures on construction and the spread of rural electrification.

Building the dams and power stations offered employment to local people, but the bulk of the workers were incomers. This created a demand for transport, accommodation, food, and entertainment. Although some workers lived in camps on-site, others – particularly the more highly-skilled and better paid – preferred to live in places like Dingwall, Strathpeffer or Muir of Ord. Their incomes stimulated house-building and other services. Some married locally and became integrated into the communities. Fred Newton – who came north from Lancashire and played football with Ross County – created a sizeable bus company transporting workers to the various construction sites.



The Hydro Board invested heavily in empowering the countryside. It laid cable to villages, farms, and crofts, and promoted the use of

electricity in homes and businesses by way of exhibitions at agricultural shows and Highland Games. It brought modern consumer appliances – including television – within the reach of farming families, and it created a need for small businesses to install, service and repair them. Its shop on Church Street in Dingwall enabled rural women to pay their bills and admire the newest domestic appliances on markets days, while the men were at the mart. The dams changed so much.



Sources and Further Reading:

- Peter Payne, *The Hydro* (1988),
- Emma Wood, *The Hydro Boys. Pioneers of Renewable Energy* (2002);
- James Miller, *The Dam Builders: Power from the Glens* (2002)

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