

# Thomas Telford: Changing the Highlands

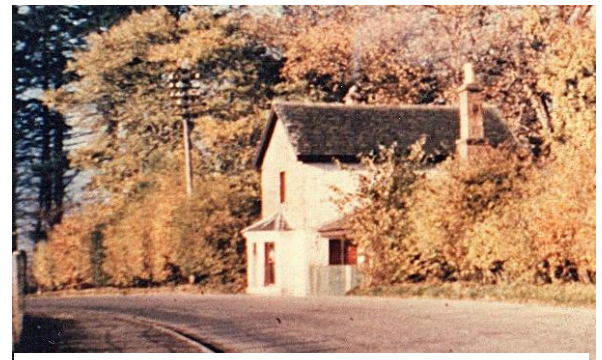
*by Susan Kruse of Dingwall Museum*

Thomas Telford (1757–1834) was a civil engineer, architect and stone mason who worked throughout the UK and in Europe. Working first for the British Fisheries Society, then for the Highland Commissioners for Roads and Bridges, he had a profound impact on the Highlands in the early 1800s, being responsible for almost 1000 miles of new roads, over 100 iron and stone bridges, large and small canals, piers, harbours, churches, manses and even towns. The remains of Telford's works in the Highlands include all of these, as well as milestones, toll houses and other associated structures. The Highlands after his work was a very different place, with at long last the basis for wheeled transport between many previously remote areas.



Telford's roads linking Dingwall have not been the subject of detailed study. They formed a hub, stretching to the west to Lochcarron, to the south to Inverness, with a branch eastwards from Conon Bridge to Fortrose, and to the north via the Struie towards the Dornoch Firth or towards Tain via Invergordon. The road to the west caused some problems around Dingwall, due to the 'Morass near Dingwall', with the result, according to the Commissioners' report, that the finished road was deemed soft and muddy, requiring a great deal of building materials.

There are still some structures surviving from this undertaking. The bridge in Contin can still be seen, although it has been bypassed by the current road bridge. The bridge over the river Conon between Maryburgh and Conon Bridge was a similarly impressive structure, though now gone. Roads required tollhouses, and an unusual one in Maryburgh still survives. There was one to the west of Dingwall at the corner where Docharty Road is situated. A similar tollhouse was at Novar (also now demolished), Tain (still to be seen beside the A9) and Munloch (much altered).



*Dingwall Tollhouse © Kenny Laing*

While Telford's Caledonian Canal is considered an engineering masterpiece, he was also involved in other canals, including the short one in Dingwall meant to allow shipping to come into the burgh. Before that, ships had to beach on the shore. Telford deepened the river Peffery in 1815-1819, diverting it into a cut. However, the canal continually silted up, requiring frequent dredging and repairs, and income from the harbour was insufficient to cover this. The burgh council tried to get the Commissioners to take it on, but they wisely refused. When the railway was built in the 1860s, the bridge over the canal meant that ships could no longer sail up to Tulloch Street, and in many cases it was easier and cheaper to ship goods via rail. By the 1880s the canal was probably no longer used. At low tide you can still see some of the wharves and timber riveting near Tulloch Street and below the rail bridge.



*Dingwall Canal © Forbes Munro*

After the Napoleonic Wars, Parliament funded the building of a number of churches in the UK, with the Church of Scotland Act of 1824 in Scotland. The budget was much smaller for Scotland than England, so only 30 churches were built in the Highlands and Islands. Landlords supplied the land. The Commissioners for Highland Roads and Bridges were tasked to select and complete the sites, and they turned to Telford to complete the task to budget. His designs for churches and manses were fixed, so that it is readily apparent when you encounter them. Two churches survive in our area: one in Strathconan, now converted to a dwelling, and one at Kinlochluichart which is managed by the local community. Ullapool Museum is housed in a Telford church.



*Kinlochluichart Church*



*Elevation drawing of Conon Bridge*

### **Further reading**

There are a number of biographies of Telford, but few concern themselves with his work in the Highlands. See a summary in the [Highland Regional ScARF](#) with a bibliography of further information:

- **Dingwall Canal** – *The Dingwall Canal*, by Kenneth R Crew published by Dingwall Museum. See also <https://canmore.org.uk/site/12769/dingwall-canal>
- **Churches** – see Allan Maclean, *Telford's Highland Churches* (1989).
- **Telford's autobiography** and atlas are at Inverness Library – well worth browsing!