

From crofter to canal builder *Bho chroitearachd gu togail canàl*

Pronounced: Vo chroyterack goo toke-al canal

The construction of the Caledonian Canal *Canàl Cailleannach* cost £912,373 - equivalent to almost £40 million today. Almost two-thirds of this amount found its way into the Highland economy in the form of much-needed wages.

The Canal Commissioners also had to provide the workers with shelter and food, often in remote locations. Housing ranged from temporary billets in newly-built lock-keepers' houses, to mini-villages of timber-framed houses and turf huts. Cows were kept to provide milk and oatmeal was bought in large quantities and sold to the workers at cost.

On smaller canals elsewhere, specialist teams of "navvies", short for navigators, dug the canals. Here in the Highlands no such workforce was available. Most Highlanders were crofters *croitearan* (traditional small-scale farmers) and fished too. They had to be taught all the basic canal-building techniques from scratch. In addition, many wanted to return home at certain times to help with the harvest *foghar* or the herring-boats *bàtaichean sgadain*, or to cut peats *mòine* for their winter fire.

Did you know...?

Whisky both helped and hindered canal building. Men working in the water were given whisky *uisge-beatha* (water of life) - presumably to warm them up (or cheer them up!). However, the "pernicious habit of drinking whisky" was sometimes a problem. In fact, a brewery was built at Corpach, near Fort William, to encourage the workers to drink beer instead!

