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Oil Fuel Storage Complex
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THE TUNNEL

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Invergordon

Excavated out of solid rock, under a hill, the former Admiralty underground oil storage facility behind Invergordon was officially named "Inchindown Admiralty Underground Oil Storage Depot". It was known throughout Easter Ross as "The Tunnel" when it was built between 1938-41. 1938-41

Its purpose was to provide a huge bombproof reserve supply of furnace oil for the warships of the home fleet. At that time there were many battleships, carriers and cruisers and they consumed thousands of tons of oil fuel. With war looming on the horizon, the huge above ground oil tanks at Invergordon were now vulnerable to air attack. They had been there since the warships changed from coal to oil fuel around 1913.

The site, along with the 4 miles of trench for the large diameter oil pipes to the pier head, provided much needed work in the area at a time of high unemployment. Huge squads of workmen were engaged on the work. The trench would have been excavated by hand-digging, no J.C.B. excavators at that time. A camp for travelling men was built at nearby Castle Dobie.

Many of the workmen from the towns and villages of Easter Ross had to cycle to the site, not a pleasant journey in the severe winters of that time. The pay would have been about one shilling per hour (5p).

Inside "The Tunnel" the work was dangerous and unhealthy. No safety helmets in these days but I have been told that paper masks were issued. The main contractor was Baldry, Yerborough and Hutchison. There are still men in the area who worked at the site and are now in their 80's.

There were fatalities I believe, and men injured by rock falls. Many of the workers contracted lung and chest problems with the rock dust and were unable to work in later years. There were little health and safety measures in place at that time.

The excavated rock was taken to a tip at the foot of the hill by a small railway. Some of this rock was used for construction purposes at the smelter in later years.

Furnace oil was stored at the facility until 1982. Inchindown consists of six caverns (cells) excavated in rock together with two access tunnels, one at each end of the cells which are 237 m long x 9.14 m x 13 m. Each has a capacity of 5.6 million gallons. They are separated by 15 m of intact rock and are lined with 18 inches of concrete. The service tunnels are also partially lined with concrete and contain the pipelines below floor level. These pipelines were fed into the pump house at Tomich Farm (now flats) and thence to Seabank Oil Depot and to the pier head, where the large oil tankers loaded and discharged. I believe many tankers were lost in the war taking oil to Invergordon, some in the Moray Firth.

The above ground oil tanks at Seabank were bombed in February 1941 by a low flying German aircraft. Fortunately only one tank, No. 13 was hit, causing the thick black fuel oil to flood the Railway Station and temporarily disrupt rail services. A bomb was also dropped at a farm near the pipeline to Inchindown, killing a sheep.

West Pier

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The fuel tanks were then protected by thick blast-proof brick walls, with large numbers of bricklayers being engaged on this task.

After the war, the fleet using the Cromarty Firth was smaller and not so much fuel oil was required. Eventually, due to naval cuts, the base was surplus to requirements and sold off.

Inchindown facility had served its purpose. This little known site, together with the Seabank and Cromlet oil tanks, played no small part in the war at sea by providing the fighting ships of the fleet with the oil fuel they required to perform their tasks in the difficult days of World War 2.

Bearing in mind the huge cost of construction of the site and the hardship suffered by many, it is hoped that a use may be found for the facility which will benefit all in the area and provide employment.

D.A.H.

Thanks to all who provided information.