

THE CROMARTY FIRTH - 1900-2014

Donny Hendry

The following is an account of events which occurred in the Firth during these years. Stretching inland for almost 20 miles from the Moray Firth to Dingwall, it is one of the best natural harbours in the British Isles. It was used as an anchorage for many decades before 1900 by warships of the Royal Navy and coastal shipping. The impressive cliffs at either side of the entrance are known as the North and South Sutors. Legend has it that at one time the entrance was so narrow that two shoemakers or sutors, one on each side, could throw a shoemaker's last, which they shared, across to each other when required.

During the early part of the last century there were six ferries in use in the Firth and now only one remains. A car ferry from Cromarty to Nigg during the summer months. The ferries from Invergordon to Cromarty and Balblair finished during the 1970s at Alness, Foulis and Dingwall. They finished when road transport came on the scene. There were old stone piers at Balintraid and Belliport near Dalmore. There were 4 grain stores on the shores of the Firth at Alness, Balintraid, Balblair and Foulis. The latter has been renovated. Until the 1960s fishing for Kessock herring was carried out during the season, annually, by many fishing boats from Avoch. This was a smaller type of herring peculiar to the three Firths. Sadly, they have disappeared from the area. They were so tasty.

Between 1900 and 1914 many large battleships and cruisers were being built in the shipyards of Britain and Germany and many of the British warships being built would arrive in the Cromarty Firth in 1914 to form Admiral Jellicoe's battleship and cruiser squadrons. In 1912/1913 war clouds were looming on the horizon in Europe and preparations for war were evident in the area. At that time a new pier was being constructed for the admiralty and the existing stone piers, at Invergordon were being extended. Many oil fuel storage tanks were being built at Seabank. Warships were changing from coal to oil-burning. The Firth was now designated as a naval base and a King's Harbour Master appointed. A new railway line was constructed between the local railway station at Invergordon and the new Admiralty pier.

Around this time, dockyard vessels from southern dockyards arrived in the Firth to lay mooring buoys for warships. Many oil tankers, laden with fuel oil from foreign parts, arrived at Invergordon to supply the newly built storage tanks at Seabank. At Cromarty, the very first seaplane base was established to train naval pilots in the sheltered waters. Winston Churchill, then First Lord of the Admiralty, on a visit to the Firth on the admiralty yacht, began his flying training there and gained 'his wings'.

Around that time a company of Royal Marine artillery men arrived in Cromarty. Their task was to prepare gun emplacements in the north and south sutors for heavy ex-naval guns which they would then man. When the emplacements in the cliffs were completed the huge guns were towed into position by steam traction engines.

Winston Churchill who was on a further visit to the Firth on the Admiralty yacht, visited the sites when the guns were tested.

The Cromarty Firth was then the best defended base in Britain at that time.

At the outbreak of war in 1914 there was much activity ashore and afloat at Invergordon. Many dockyard ships were arriving, a floating dock, cranes, repair ships etc. Many warships were sailing north to the Firth from southern ports. At the sutors an anti-submarine boom was soon laid across the entrance to the Firth. It had been constructed hurriedly at Inverness and towed round to the sutors. It was constructed of huge logs and steel rope.

Ashore, the existing small dockyard was extended, new workshops, stores, etc. were built in a short time. A huge camp was built for the many dockyard workers who would be arriving.

All private public houses in most of the towns and villages around the Firth were replaced by state-controlled public houses and would remain that way until 1972, when there were sold off.

On December 30th 1915 the armoured cruiser HMS 'Natal' blew up at anchor in the firth near Cromarty. 390 of the crew and 10 civilians perished in the disaster. A number of the crew are buried at Rosskeen Cemetery in Invergordon.

In 1916, at the Battle of Jutland where the huge British and German fleets clashed,

many of Admiral Jellicoe's battleships from the Firth took part and some returned to the Firth, badly damaged, for repair and to land the wounded casualties at the newly built naval hospital. Some are buried at Rosskeen Cemetery. Jutland was the last battle of the giant warships in the North Sea but the cruisers and destroyers from the Firth continued their sweeps and patrols in the North Sea as German u-boats and surface raiders were still active.

In 1917, after America came into the war, the US Navy took over Dalmore Distillery as a mine assembly base. A huge minefield across the North Sea was planned. Several US mine-layers arrived in the Firth for this task and made use of the Admiralty Pier at Invergordon.

During 1918 a new pier was under construction at Dalmore for the mine-layers but after the war's end it was abandoned. It was, however, extended by the RAF, for use by their marine craft in 1942 for the new base at Alness.

During 1919, after the end of hostilities, the naval base was quickly run down. Afloat all the warships and auxiliary vessels returned south to their home parts, as did the floating dock and repair ships. Ashore, the workers' camps were closed and many hundreds of workers returned south. Many dockyard buildings were demolished or sold off, as was most of the Admiralty housing and hospital. Only around 150 employees were retained.

For most of WW1 there were large training brigades of troops from Highland regiments stationed at Invergordon, Cromarty and Nigg. Convenient for the defence of the base but primarily to provide replacements for the horrendous number of casualties on the western front.

During 1919, after the surrender of the German fleet and the scuttling of their warships at Scapa Flow, the skeleton crews were taken down to the Cromarty Firth and landed at Nigg, then marched to Nigg Railway station where they entrained en route to Germany. As there was a lot of anti-German feeling at that time this quiet location was chosen to prevent incidents.

In the 1920s and 1930s the Atlantic Fleet, later named the Home Fleet, came north annually in May and September for exercises in the Moray Firth and arrived in the firth at weekends to refuel, replenish and for

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recreation. They were welcome visitors as they brought a lot of trade to the area.

It was a fantastic sight to see the fleet arriving up the Firth in line astern, the flag-ship leading and all the crews lining their decks. They were followed by the destroyer flotillas and submarines heading for the west anchorage. At night the Firth was lit up like a city. The huge search lights of the battleships sweeping the Firth and shoreline.

In September 1931, the Atlantic Fleet at anchor in the Cromarty Firth, mutinied over pay cuts. It was more a strike than a mutiny as there was no bloodshed. Some of the crews of the warships disobeyed orders thus preventing the fleet sailing for exercises. It was afterwards called the "Invergordon Mutiny" and it made headlines in every national newspaper, affected the world's gold standard and sent shockwaves throughout the world. At this time the British Navy was the policeman of the world and was held in high esteem everywhere.

In the aftermath heads did roll. Some senior officers were placed on the retired list and the ringleaders and trouble makers discharged with services no longer required.

In 1937 war clouds were appearing on the horizon in Europe as they had done twenty-five years before and signs of preparations for war could be seen in the Firth. A new RAF station was constructed at Evanton. When completed it was used by bomber squadrons from England using the bombing range at Tain. It was also used by planes from the aircraft carriers of the fleet. The first aircraft carrier HMS 'Argus' arrived in the Firth in the early 1920s, using a field near Delny station for landings.

At Invergordon new oil fuel storage tanks were being constructed for the Admiralty, providing much needed employment locally. Invergordon was also to be a flying-boat base and in 1938 several squadrons arrived in formation. After many mooring buoys were laid in both East and West anchorages, a floating dock also arrived.

In 1938 work commenced on an underground oil fuel storage facility at Inchindown, in the hills behind Invergordon. Tunnels and storage areas had to be

drilled in solid rock. A pipe line to the Admiralty pier was also constructed.

In September 1939 the Home Fleet was at anchor in the Firth and on the outbreak of WW2 made a hurried departure to their war station at Scapa Flow, leaving the anti-aircraft cruiser HMS Curlew for the defence of the base.

Although the Firth was not the prominent fleet base it was in WW1, it was still a very important base in WW2, mainly for refuelling and a very busy flying boat base. Many tankers came and went and many destroyers and fleet minesweepers arrived to refuel. There was a flotilla of minesweepers, ex-fishing trawlers, based there for sweeping the Moray Firth of mines.

After the invasion scare in 1940, large garrisons of troops were stationed in the Orkney Islands, Shetlands and the Faroes. Several troop carriers, ex-cross channel ferries were based in the Firth to attend to their needs, leave parties, replacements etc, and the army training camp at Invergordon was used with troop trains taking the service men to southern parts. The base supplied most the oil-fuel for the home fleet at Scapa Flow and there was much sea traffic between the two bases. Invergordon was also the rail-head for all the stores for the fleet. Many railway wagons arrived at the pier daily and the stores were loaded on to a fleet of storeships all bound for Scapa. The rail-head was shifted to Aberdeen in 1943 as the Piers at Invergordon were required for landing craft operations in preparation for D-Day.

Although there were many air raids in the earlier years at Scapa Flow there was only one raid in 1941 on the base at Invergordon when a low flying German Junkers 88 Bomber hit No. 13 oil storage tank causing a huge spillage of thick black fuel oil in the railway station area and interrupting rail and road traffic for several days. There were no casualties.

During 1942/43 a new base for the RAF was built at Alness with new slipways for the Sunderland and Catalina flying boats, and for several years, a Dutch cross-channel ferry "S.S. Batavier" was berthed at the Admiralty Pier to provide

accommodation for RAF flying boat crews. During the early days of the war a mine assembly base and new pier was constructed at Nigg along with a light railway from the facility to the pier for loading the mines onto the mine-layers berthed there.

At nearby Nigg Bay from 1943-45 Barracuda dive bombers from nearby RNAS Fearn used this area for practice on targets anchored in the shallow waters. In the last months of 1943 several flotillas of various types of landing craft arrived at Invergordon loaded with tanks, vehicles and troops. They made practice landings in preparation for D-Day in the Moray Firth at Nairn and at Inver village area in Easter Ross, the largest part of the Tarbat Peninsula having been evacuated for several months in 1944.

As mentioned in Winston Churchill's biography "Road to Victory" there was to have been a "Big Three" meeting in the Cromarty Firth in September 1944. Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin were to have arrived by warship and use Balmoral Castle for their meetings. However, Stalin called off as he was very much involved with his generals in the huge battles to drive the Germans out of Russia.

After WW2 smaller fleet did return annually for exercises and battleships replaced by aircraft carriers and did so until the 1960s and were joined by Nato warships on many occasions. The last British battleship HMS "Vanguard" visited the Firth in the 1950s. Shortly after WW2 the old wooden Admiralty Pier was replaced by a new concrete facility and completed in 1952. The old wooden pier served the base well in two world wars.

In 1969/70 British Aluminium built a smelter at Inverbreakie Farm and a new pier at Saltburn, now used by the Port Authority. The smelter closed in 1981 due to the high cost of electricity. At Nigg in 1972 an oil rig yard was built by the American firm Brown & Root, the first rig constructed was launched in 1974. The yard continued production until the 1990s. It is now a rig repair yard.

In the 1980s Invergordon was officially closed as a naval base and the pier, seabank oil-fuel storage tanks, yard and buildings and the underground storage facility at Inchindown were all sold off. It was the end of a historic association with the Royal Navy for over 70 years as a naval base in the Cromarty Firth.

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OLD FILE



British Legion Members with children who planted flowers at Fearn War Memorial. One of our story writers this issue, Donnie Hendry, is pictured back row 7th from left with dark jacket. His article on the Cromarty Firth starts on pages 12-13 and finishes below.

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Situated beside the oil rig yard at Nigg, an oil storage facility was built in the 1980s along with a new pier for oil tankers. Oil is piped to the terminal from the Beatrice Field, off the Caithness coast to the terminal and then to the tankers at the pier for onward shipment to the detinaries.

After completion of the first oil rig in 1974 at Nigg Yard, work was started in the west pier area at Invergordon to construct a rig repair base which has been extended over the years. In the 1980s H.M. The Queen attended the opening of the Queen's Dock and over the years many oil rigs and support vessels have used the facility, creating much employment locally.

Cruise liners began to visit Invergordon in the 1980s and these massive vessels used the piers for berthing and landing the tourists. They travelled to places of interest by coach and then returned in the late afternoon to embark for their next port of call. The number of liners visiting the Firth has increased annually, bringing much trade to the area.

I believe it was in the late 1970s that the R.N.L.I. Lifeboat Station was transferred from Cromarty to Invergordon. They now have a powerful modern lifeboat and a capable volunteer crew.

In the 1980s a purpose built headquarters was built for the Cromarty Firth Port Authority adjacent to the piers and with a commanding view of the Firth. The authority is responsible for all movements and berthing of oil rigs, liners and all other shipping in the Firth and employs a large number of local staff.

Lying a short distance from the south Sutor, just inside the Firth is the Charming sea-side town of Cromarty much visited by the navy men from the warships in the nearby anchorage in days gone by. They were welcome visitors to the town as they brought much trade to the area. It had a busy harbour for coastal shipping and a thriving fishing industry in the 19th century when fish was in abundance in all the Firths. It was a busy lifeboat station for many years and it also has the only lighthouse in the Firth, located beside the harbour.

Donnie Hendry

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