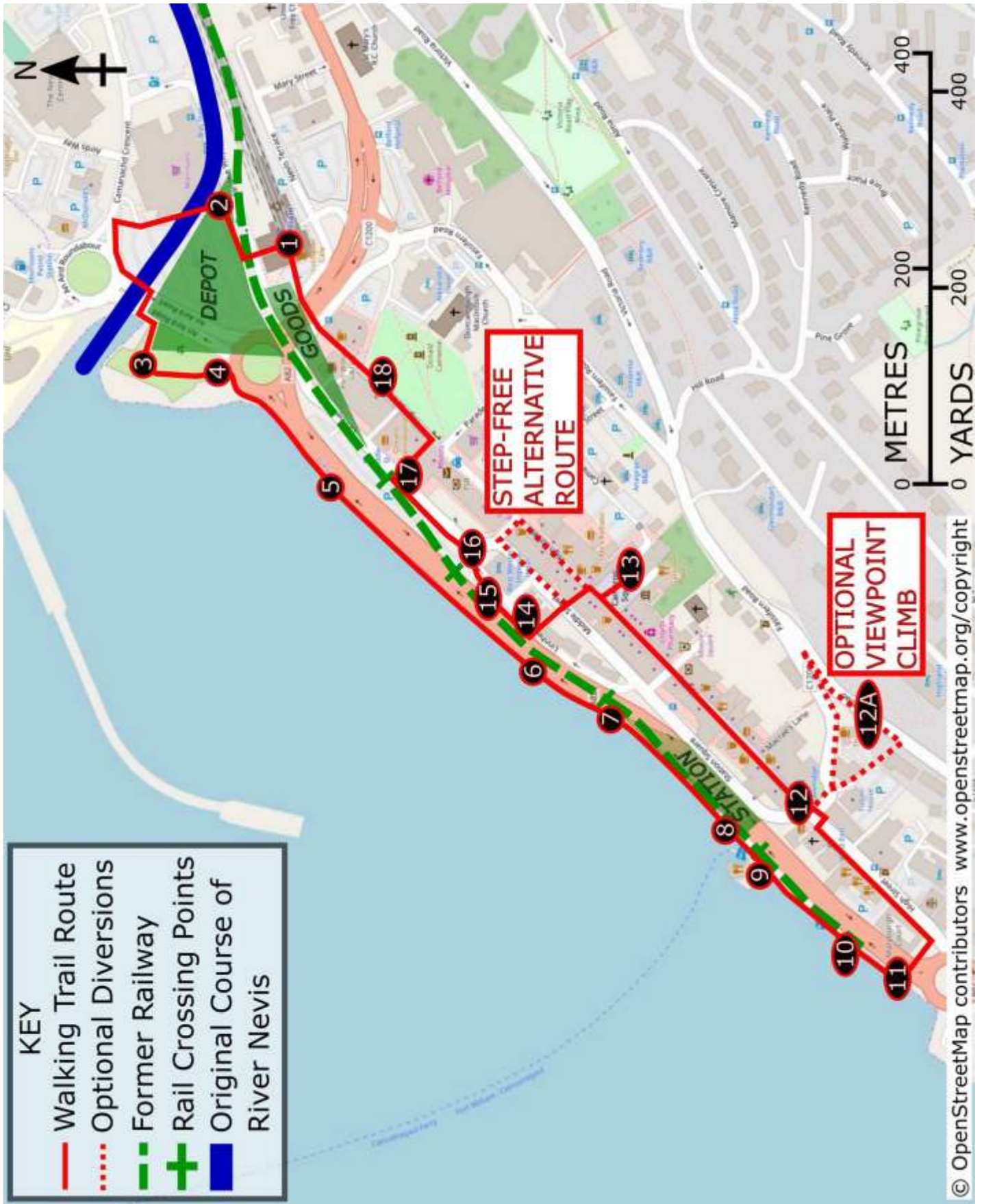


FORT WILLIAM RAIL TRAIL

Welcome to this self-guided walking trail through 125 years of railway history in Fort William. The route is 2.5km (1.5 miles) long and follows easy to walk public footpaths. It is all level except for one (optional) hill section. There are 19 stops, each with a historic photograph. Modern images help you match the past scene with the present day.



The trail starts at today's Railway Station at the east end of the High Street.

WARNING: Roads in Fort William can be very busy, especially the A82 dual carriageway along the waterfront. Please take special care on this section and when crossing roads. Keep a close eye on children. Please be courteous to other users and do not block the footpath when pausing at the many interesting stops along the way.

1. MODERN RAILWAY STATION



Today's Fort William station was opened by British Rail on 13th June 1975 when the railway was shortened to make way for the dual carriageway road along the seafront. The station is served by ScotRail trains to Glasgow and Mallaig, the Caledonian Sleeper service to London and, in summer, the Jacobite steam train to Mallaig.

Image Courtesy of Iain Henshaw.

Leave the station via the north exit (by the toilets). Cross MacFarlane way, turn right and follow the rain shelter. Stop at the corner of Morrisons (outside the Café).

2. DEPOT AREA – WATER TANKS & COALING STAGE

Look towards Morrisons car park. Until the 1970's, this area would have been covered with railway tracks. The main line continued west towards the old station, while what is now Morrisons car park (and much of the land beyond) would have been taken up with sidings, loading banks, sheds and a turntable. In the southeast corner, near where you are now standing, were the water tanks and coaling stage where steam locos were replenished. Immediately to the east was the River Nevis, where Morrisons now stands.



This photo shows the old water tank bases in the course of demolition in 1975, several years after steam engines had been replaced by diesels. The abandoned trackbed on the right once led to the top of the coaling stage.

Image by Ian C Clark, Courtesy of the West Highland Museum.

To see the area in its steam-age heyday, take a look at these images (author unknown), taken from the top of one of the water tanks:

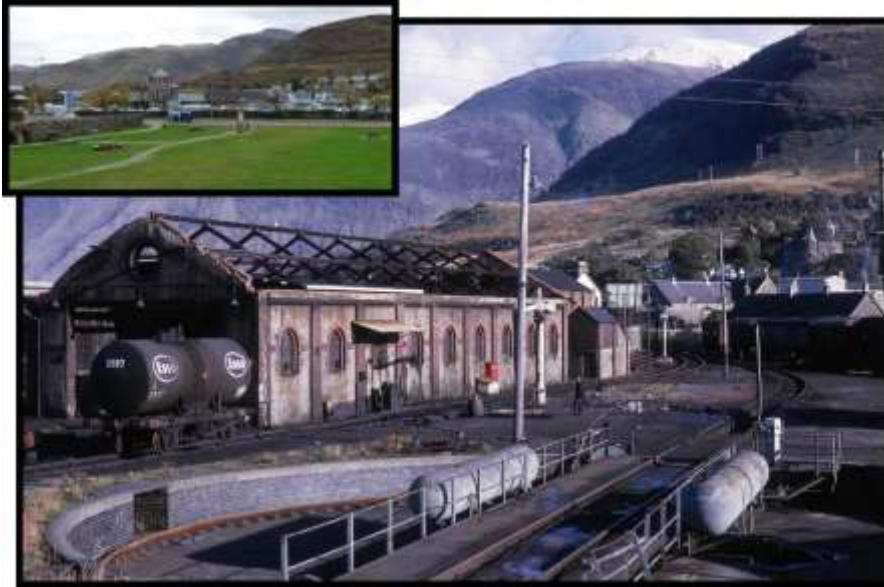
<https://tinyurl.com/y364aj2t>

<https://tinyurl.com/yxzbpdqc>

Walk north past the shop entrance, exit the car park and turn left towards An Aird roundabout. Bear left (west) to skirt the roundabout and carefully cross An Aird Road towards the Old Fort of Fort William. Enter the fort, following the path next to the wall until you reach the grassy bank, then turn and look back towards Morrisons.

3. OLD FORT – ENGINE SHED & TURNTABLE

The fort stood here for 200 years before much of it was demolished in the 1890's to make way for the coming of the West Highland Railway. The open grassy area where you are standing housed the turntable and engine shed, with the coaling stage behind. The River Nevis ran just outside the walls of the fort, as it flowed into Loch Linnhe. The river was later diverted as part of a land reclamation scheme but traces of its original course can be seen outside the sally port (the small arch through the wall on the left).



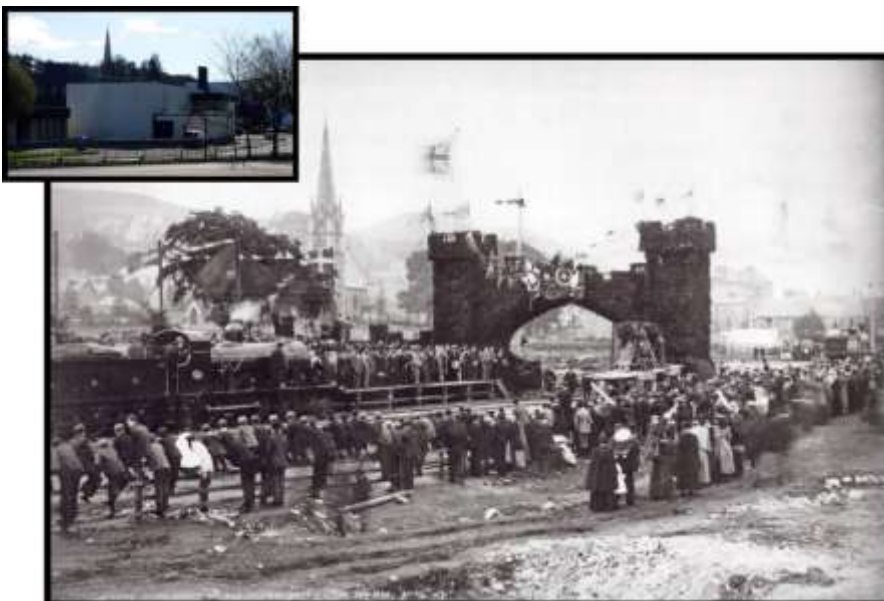
This 1964 view shows the turntable and engine shed, looking the worse for wear towards the end of its life. The green-turreted church and the hills behind have not changed since the photograph was taken, providing a useful bearing.

Image by J M Boyes, courtesy of Armstrong Railway Photographic Trust.

Continue along the path through the fort, keeping the raised bank on your right. Stop when you reach the A82 roundabout.

4. OPENING CEREMONY PLATFORM

The West Highland Railway opened on the 7th August 1894 but the grand opening ceremony was held the following Saturday (the 11th). A special train with invited VIPs left Glasgow at 08.15am and arrived at a temporary platform, roughly where the roundabout is now located. At 12.45 the ceremony began and the train passed through a 'triumphal arch'.



This picture was taken at the opening ceremony. The area is now unrecognisable from its appearance in 1894 but the pointed spire of St Andrew's Church is an enduring landmark in the background.

Image supplied by High Life Highland / Am Baille.

Turn right, skirt the roundabout and follow the A82 bypass footpath for 150m, keeping the road on your left and the sea on your right. Look for the pointed spire of St Andrew's Church above the buildings and stop roughly in line with it.

5. FORESHORE & CINDER PATH

The foreshore here became the focus of a bitter dispute between the West Highland Railway company and the townspeople of Fort William. The locals wanted an open promenade with an unobtrusive tramway but the company insisted on a fully fenced railway line, which threatened to cut the town off from the sea. The eventual compromise was a new road (Linnhe Rd) on the landward side of the line and the 'cinder path' for pedestrians on the seaward side. Three crossing points over the line connected the path to the town.



An access road from the depot crossed the line here (stop 17). Beyond this point was only the narrow 'cinder path' as can be seen in this 1952 image.

NOTE: The A82 bypass road is much wider than the railway was, so the original path was closer to the town than today's footway.

Image by E R Morten, courtesy of Jeremy Suter.

Keep walking southwest along the A82 footpath, stopping where the road starts to curve left (near a green litter bin). Pause and look back along the waterfront.

6. LUCAS & AIRD CONSTRUCTION PIER

The West Highland Railway was built by construction firm Lucas & Aird. The only practical way to transport their equipment and building materials to this remote spot was by ship, so the contractors built a temporary pier in Loch Linnhe, roughly where you are now standing, to unload their materials.

NOTE: The pier you can see out in the loch today, with red and white buildings on, was built much later (in the 1920's) to serve the Aluminium works.



This image, looking back towards the Old Fort, shows the Lucas & Aird pier during the main construction period of the railway (1889-1894). The pier was removed when the railway opened and no trace remains today.

Image Crown copyright. National Records of Scotland, BR/WEH/4/3/17.

Continue along the A82 footpath, stopping opposite the red building (Mairi MacIntyre).

7. PLATFORM-END CROSSING

This location marks the eastern limit of the old Fort William station. The sea-wall cinder path ended here and pedestrians had to cross the line using a boarded crossing at the platform-ends (roughly where dropped kerbs can be seen today). The station had three platform lines, the two nearest the town being dead-end 'bays'. The track next to the sea continued past the station and could therefore accommodate longer trains.



This 1974 image shows the station as viewed from the east. The pier on the right, and the (now yellow) turreted building on the left provide good landmarks today.

Image by John Ford, collection David Ford.

Keep walking southwest along the A82 footpath, stopping at the pedestrian crossing adjacent to the bus shelter.

8. OLD STATION ENTRANCE

Look across the bypass towards 'Stag and Buck' (the former Station Bar). On the left was the main entrance to the station, which served the town from 1894-1975. The cramped location made it awkward to operate but it was very convenient for passengers accessing the town, and for onward connections by boat and - in later years - by bus. Trains departed from here to Mallaig, Glasgow and further afield for 80 years but the station was swept away to make space for the dual-carriageway road.



This image shows the main entrance (at the west end of the station) on a summer's day in 1955. MacBrayne's buses are in evidence on the pier to the left. The station also had a smaller entrance from the lane on the south side.

Image by J W Armstrong, courtesy of Armstrong Railway Photographic Trust.

Keep walking southwest for 20m down the slope and turn right onto the pier.

9. TOWN PIER

This pier was first built in the early 19th century, before a railway was even thought of. It was constructed of large granite blocks, laid out in an 'L' shape. This original structure survives as the right-hand (east) part of today's pier, largely covered by the Crannog restaurant. As boats became larger, an extension was built - initially of timber, later iron and steel. The pier served regular steamers to coastal towns such as Oban and as far afield as Glasgow. Tourist trips have also always been popular and you can still take pleasure cruises from here in summer. The Camusnagaul ferry crosses the loch from the slipway.



This image was taken in the 1960's when the pier was in its heyday serving larger MacBrayne's steamers as well as buses.

In 1958, Queen Elizabeth used this pier when she visited Fort William with the Royal Yacht Britannia.

Postcard image used with permission of the John Hinde Archive.

Continue southwest along the sea wall and stop by the (now crumbling) 'New Pier'.

10. NEW PIER AND SIDINGS

The track through the old station's platform 1 continued along the sea wall beyond the station, ending at two sidings which served the 'New Pier'. This private pier was built of concrete and rubble, by local distiller Donald P MacDonald to bring in raw materials for the distilling process and carry finished whisky to market. MacDonald later sold it to the West Highland Railway and it is sometimes referred to as the 'Railway Pier'.



This image shows the 'New Pier' and the two quayside sidings which served it. After the distillery traffic diminished, one siding was removed but the line nearest the sea was retained to stable coaches and to allow locos of arriving services to draw forward (to avoid blocking access to the Town Pier for too long).

Image by H. C. Casserley.

Continue southwest to the pedestrian crossing. Before going over the road, look ahead along the coast.

11. BALLACHULISH EXTENSION

The railway was not always intended to end at Fort William. Various schemes were promoted for railways along the coast beyond here towards Oban and the south, and in 1896 the West Highland Railway obtained parliamentary powers to extend their line to Ballachulish. Where you are standing was a shingle beach, which the line would have crossed on a low viaduct. However, rivalry between the various railway companies of the time got in the way and the line was never built.



This view shows The West End Hotel and the shingle beach that the line would have crossed. The road has since been built out across the former beach.

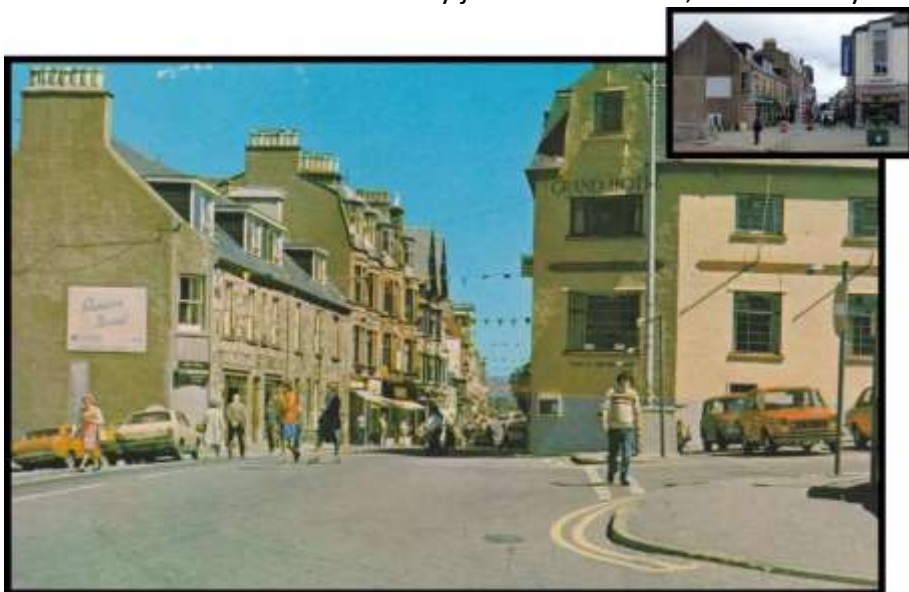
Across the road, the (Muthu) West End Hotel has been extended but the main (central) section is still recognisable from the photo.

Image courtesy of Alistair Ness, The Granite House.

Cross the A82 at the lights and walk straight ahead. Opposite the hotel, turn left onto the High Street. Continue northeast to the zebra crossing, go over the road and stop in Gordon Square by the 'Sore Feet' (seated walker) statue.

12. STATION HOTEL (CHEVALIER)

What is now the gift shop on the left was once the 'Station Hotel'. In fact the hotel had several names over the years, including 'The Chevalier Hotel', 'The North British Hotel' and the 'The Chevalier Station Hotel'. The station itself was conveniently just down the hill, immediately behind the hotel.



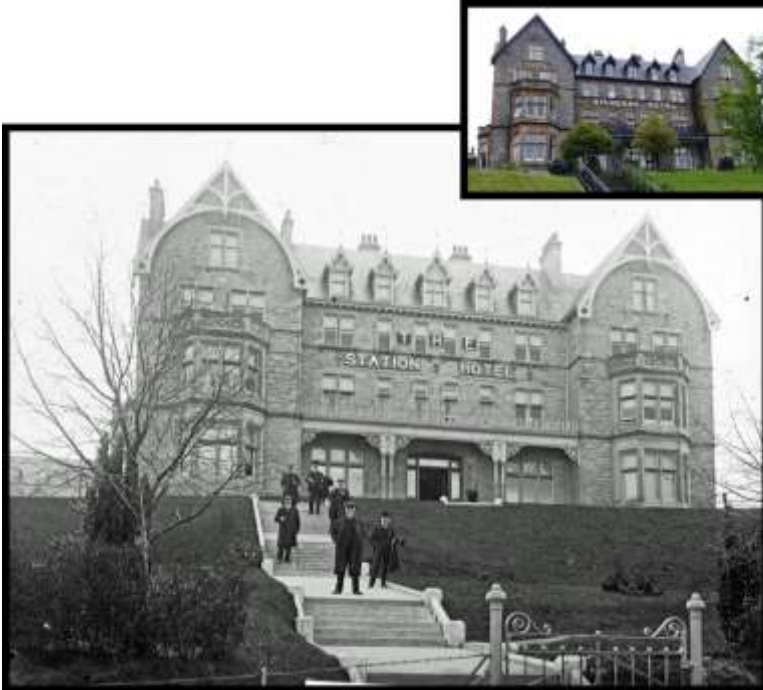
This 1977 postcard image shows the Station and Grand Hotels in Gordon Square. The white sign board can still be seen today on the end wall of the building, although it is now blank.

*Image by Whiteholme (Publishers) Ltd Dundee
Courtesy of Duncan White.*

For an energetic diversion, head uphill either via Fassifern Road or the steps to the right of the old church. Pause outside what is now the Highland Hotel.

12A. STATION HOTEL (HIGHLAND)

The Station Hotel opened two years after the West Highland Railway. It was a fair distance uphill from the station itself because the hotel was intended to serve a separate high-level station planned by the Callander & Oban Railway. The Callander & Oban never reached Fort William so the new station was never built. A horse & cart conveyed passengers between the hotel and the West Highland Railway's station.



This early image shows the hotel's impressive frontage, with magnificent views across the Loch. It was later renamed The Highland Hotel, but the external appearance is virtually unchanged from its days as The Station Hotel.

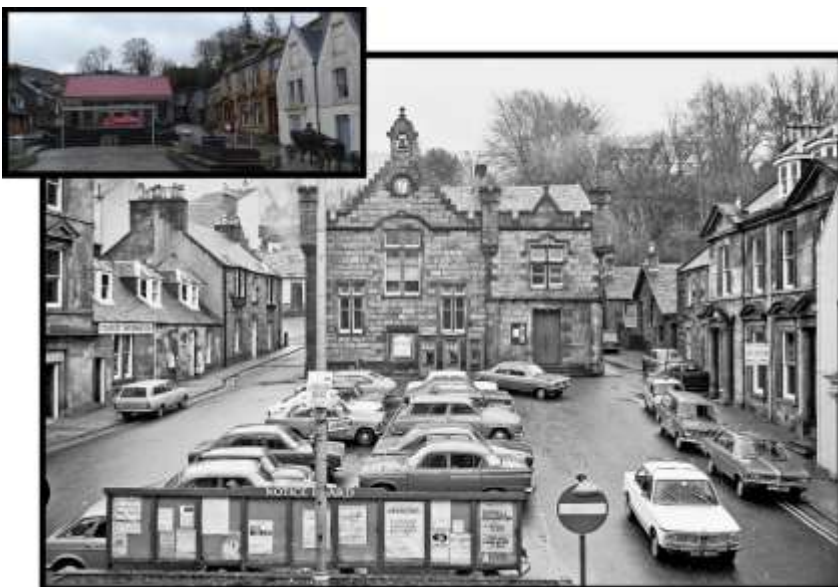
Image supplied by Highland Photographic Archive, High Life Highland.

From the Highland Hotel, return down to Gordon Square. Turn right onto the High St.

Continue northeast along the pedestrianised High Street then turn right into Cameron Square (now marked by the bronze Ford Model T.)

13. WEST HIGHLAND MUSEUM

The West Highland Museum contains a wealth of historical information about the area and offers free entry. Inside you can see the silver spade used by Lord Abinger to cut the first sod of the West Highland Railway on 23rd October 1889. A similar spade for the Invergarry & Fort Augustus Railway is also on display.



The museum has occupied this site in Cameron Square since 1926. The square was named for the Cameron Volunteers (who became the Cameron Highlanders in 1794). This picture shows the square as it was in 1973. The old Town Hall (a former church) was destroyed by fire two years later and the Highland Cinema now occupies the site.

*Image by T Kenneth MacKenzie.
Supplied by High Life Highland / Am Baille.*

Return to the High St, cross it and go down the narrow steps of Ainslie Lane (next to Marshall & Pearson). Cross Middle St and continue straight ahead past the no-entry sign to reach Linnhe Rd. Pause at the bottom of the bypass embankment.*

** Wheelchair users may avoid the steps by diverting via the High St and Fraser Square.*

14. LINNHE ROAD

Linnhe Road was built as part of the compromise 'deal' between the town and the railway company over the foreshore. Today, if you look closely at the reddish stone blocks along the side of the road (below the bypass embankment), you can see where the ornamental iron railings of the railway fence line have been sawn off. Just the other side of the railings was the 3-armed semaphore home signal and, 100 yards beyond, was the platform-end crossing (see stop 7).



This part of Linnhe road has not changed since the railway was removed. Class 27 diesel electric locomotive No 5359 shunts coaching stock at the old Fort William station on a wet day in August 1973.

*Fort William Station, 1973
cc-by-sa/2.0 - © Rob Newman -
geograph.org.uk/p/2534601.*

Walk northeast along Linnhe Rd, keeping the dual carriageway on your left, and stop outside the Rio Pizzeria and Imperial Hotel.

15. FORT WILLIAM SIGNAL BOX

Outside the Imperial Hotel was the Signal Box, which controlled all movements into and out of the tightly constrained station. To ensure that trains did not collide on the single line, train drivers had to obtain a brass signalling tablet from the signalman.



This 1964 photograph shows how close the signal box was to the Imperial Hotel (which survives today). A North British Railway coach body – long withdrawn from service by the time this photo was taken – was grounded near the signal box and used as a workshop.

*Image by J M Boyes, courtesy of
Armstrong Railway Photographic
Trust.*

Continue past the hotel to the end of Linnhe Road. Turn left onto Middle Street and stop immediately on the left, where low steps lead down to a short railing.

16. FISHERMEN'S CROSSING

A rough boarded crossing here gave access to the cinder path (roughly mid-way along its length) and to a boat slip used by local fishermen. Unusually, the crossing had no gates but this was not considered dangerous, being so close to the watchful eye of the signalman.



This 1955 image was taken from the signal box and shows the fishermen's crossing and boat slip. When the railway was being planned, fishermen and boat owners had objected strongly to the route along the foreshore. This crossing helped mitigate their loss of direct access to the sea.

Image by J W Armstrong, courtesy of Armstrong Railway Photographic Trust.

Continue northeast along Middle St and stop at a green information board and map, adjacent to the pedestrian crossing.

17. GATED LEVEL CROSSING

The level crossing, roughly where the information board is today, allowed road vehicles to reach the engine sheds, sidings and coal yard. Pedestrians could also reach the cinder path along the foreshore (stop 5). A loud clanging bell warned users that a train was approaching, while four wooden gates closed off the level crossing while the train passed.



The main (black & white) image, looking northeast towards the old fort, shows the gates closed across the road and the signal raised for an approaching train in 1955. The sheds and sidings can be seen beyond.

In the 1964 colour inset, the crossing is open to road traffic so the gates are across the track and the signal remains firmly at danger.

Main image by J W Armstrong, colour inset by J M Boyes. Both images courtesy of Armstrong Railway Photographic Trust.

Use the pedestrian crossing to cross Middle St and go straight ahead up Duff Lane. Turn left onto the High St and stop near M & Co.

18. LNER GOODS STATION

Look towards the gondola (cable car). On the left near here was the old Goods Station where a variety of merchandise was unloaded from, and loaded onto, trains. When the West Highland Line first opened, there was a goods shed on the opposite (north) side of the railway. However, after the line was taken over by the LNER in 1923, they built the larger shed shown in the photo on this (south) side of the line.



This 1975 image shows the LNER Goods Station with the Parade Garage in front (where Nevisport is today). Both buildings have since been demolished and the road has been pedestrianised, so the scene looks very different now. However, the curve in the hedge is unchanged, providing a good reference for the historic image.

Image courtesy of Kenny MacRaild.

That is the end of the trail – I hope you have found it interesting. To return to the starting point, the underpass next to Nevisport will return you to the modern-day railway station.

Feedback

If you have any queries or comments about the trail, or can offer additional historical information or images, please contact: fortwilliamrailtrail@glenfinnanstationmuseum.co.uk

Useful Web Sites

- **Fort William Rail Trail** (extra photos, maps and info): www.fortwilliamrailtrail.co.uk
- The West Highland Museum: www.westhighlandmuseum.org.uk
- Friends of the West Highland Lines: westhighlandline.org.uk
- Glenfinnan Station Museum: glenfinnanstationmuseum.co.uk

Further Reading on Local Railway History

- The West Highland Railway – Railways of the Scottish Highlands *John Thomas*
- West Highland Line – Great Railway Journeys Through Time *John McGregor*
- The New Railway – The Earliest Years of the West Highland Line *John McGregor*
- Fort William, Scenes and Cuttings from Old Postcards and Guide Books *The Granite House*

Acknowledgements

Grateful thanks to the many people who have helped me to produce this trail, in particular those who have kindly supplied and/or given permission to use the historic photographs. Special thanks to historian John McGregor, whose encyclopaedic knowledge of West Highland Railway history has been invaluable.