
Clachtoll

Ascent — around 100 metres

Difficulty — moderately easy coastal walk

Duration — 2 hours there and back

Start — grid reference NC 039 274

A walk along a beautiful stretch of coastline, which takes you through the oldest parts of the Torridonian sandstone and passes the remains of Clachtoll Broch, an Iron Age tower. Note that you are on crofting land here — please keep dogs under control.

Start from the car park in Clachtoll, which has public toilets and a ranger's hut full of information about the natural history and archaeology of the area. Walk past the toilets to Am Bearag, the Salmon Bothy [1] [NC 04063 26888], used as a base by Clachtoll salmon fishermen in the 19th and 20th centuries. Inside the bothy is a display about the history of the site. In front of the bothy is the drying green, with poles for stringing up the nets. Across the bay you can see the 'Split Rock' from which Clachtoll takes its name, clach meaning stone or rock, and toll meaning hole. This gap in the rocks used to be a natural arch, which has now collapsed.

From the Salmon Bothy, follow the track through the gate marked 'Walkers welcome', past the memorial to the Reverend Norman MacLeod, who was born in Clachtoll in 1780 and led many people from Assynt to the New World. This memorial [2] [NC 03836 27367] is made of white and green marble from the marble quarry at Ledmore.

From the memorial, follow a sign to the broch, walking around the walled area and along the coast. The rocks here are composed of thick layers of coarse-grained red sandstone and thinner bands of fine-grained mudstone, laid down in rivers and lakes 1200 million years ago. As you come over a slight rise and see the Bay of Stoer in front of you, look at the smooth surface of rock dipping down to a small inlet below your feet [3] [NC 03611 27410]. This surface is the top of one sandstone bed or layer, and shows you how these layers extend laterally over large areas. A large boulder of pink and grey striped Lewisian Gneiss is perched on top of the sloping surface, near the head of the inlet. This boulder is a glacial erratic, which was carried here by ice that had flowed across Lewisian bedrock to the east.

Looking northwards towards Stoer, you can see the contrast between the rocky landscape formed by the Lewisian Gneiss to the right of the village and the smoother, grassy slopes underlain by Torridonian Sandstone to the left.

Continue along the coast to the Clachtoll broch [4] [NC 03663 27846]. This broch was built about 2500 years ago during the Iron Age (~700 BC to AD 500), using exclusively local stone. The interior of the broch is now almost full of fallen stones, but you can still see parts of the double wall and the massive, triangular lintel stone over the door on the north side. The broch is thought to have been about nine metres high originally, with a shape rather like a modern-day cooling tower. It was probably built for defensive purposes, but exactly whom the Iron Age villagers of Clachtoll were defending themselves against is unknown. Please do not climb on the broch — it is a fragile structure.

From the broch, walk northwards to Stoer beach [5] [NC 03817 28265]. The fringes of this beach are covered in beautifully patterned boulders of black and white striped Lewisian Gneiss, red Torridonian Sandstone, and rare white Cambrian Quartzite.

From here continue westwards along the coast. There is a narrow path on the grass above the shore, but at low tide you can also scramble carefully over the rocks as far as a distinct cliff. Just below this cliff, a gently sloping surface of red sandstone is covered in the marks of ripples that, incredibly, look just as they did when they formed in the sand of a river bed, 1200 million years ago.

Scramble up on to the grass and continue along the top of the cliffs, noting the old shielings and the 'lazybeds' (ridges and furrows in the ground) that were used for growing crops in the past. A few hundred metres along, you reach a promontory, the Stac Fada peninsula, with a small island at its tip [6] [NC 03299 28476]. This peninsula is composed of a thick layer of sandstone covered in black lichen. Look closely at the rock, and you will see that it contains reddish sand grains mixed with angular shards of green volcanic material, pink pebbles of older gneiss, and blocks of mudstone and sandstone. This is a volcanic mudflow, which was formed at a time when a volcano was erupting nearby, spewing out fragments of volcanic ash and rock mixed with mud and sand.

From Stac Fada, it is worth climbing the hill of Cnoc Poll a' Mhuilte for an excellent view [7] [NC 03092 29237], Look out for a variety of wild plants, including orchids, on the slope of this hill. From the top, look back over the walk. In the foreground you can see gently dipping layers of reddish Torridonian Sandstone, covered in green grass. Beyond the village of Stoer, you can see the rocky hills of Lewisian Gneiss, and in the distance are the Torridonian mountains. From here, retrace your steps to the beach at Stoer and then follow the road back to Clachtoll, past the reed-fringed loch.

Figures

(Figure 49) Clachtoll. Painting of walk by Elizabeth Pickett.

(Figure 50) The Split Rock at Clachtoll.

(Figure 51) The Salmon Bothy.

(Figure 52) Erratic boulder of Lewisian Gneiss, perched on top of a sandstone bed above the Bay of Stoer.

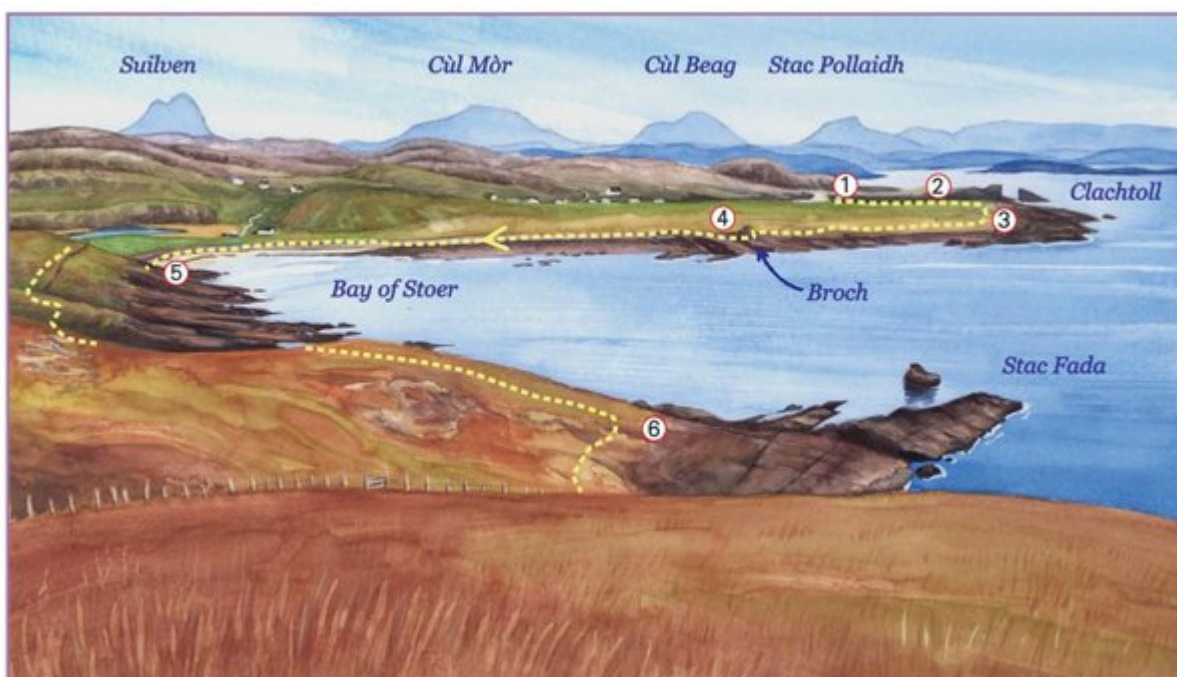
(Figure 53) Clachtoll broch.

(Figure 54) Boulders of Lewisian Gneiss and Torridonian Sandstone on Stoer beach.

(Figure 55) Rippled Torridonian Sandstone on the shore at Stoer.

(Figure 56) The Stac Fada peninsula, composed of a layer of sandstone mixed with volcanic ash.

(Figure 57) View east from Cnoc Poll a' Mhuilte.



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(Figure 50) The Split Rock at Clachtoll.



(Figure 51) The Salmon Bothy.



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(Figure 54) Boulders of Lewisian Gneiss and Torridonian Sandstone on Stoer beach.



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(Figure 56) The Stac Fada peninsula, composed of a layer of sandstone mixed with volcanic ash.



(Figure 57) View east from Cnoc Poll a' Mhuilt.