

Melvich sits on the north coast to the west of Melvich Bay, 15 miles west of Thurso. It lies mainly on the A836 whilst Portskerra has access to the sea. Here can be found a mix of old and new with a close affinity to the fishing way of life. The Drowning Memorial, a monument near the pier, honours fishermen from the village lost at sea.



At the western end of Loch Naver lies **Altnaharra**, 13 miles south of Tongue. There are numerous examples of former settlements in the area, including hut circles, heaps of clearance stones and field terraces. An inn was built here around 1820 and by the 1840's the village had developed into a small angling resort. Altnaharra today has few inhabitants but the settlement is dispersed over a wide area of land.

Strathy is a coastal settlement that grew to accommodate clearance villagers mainly from Strathnaver. Until the clearances there had been just four crofters in Strathy. It is a sparse and scattered community, spread across the wide valley of the River Strathy as it flows into Strathy Bay. The village has four churches, all built between 1828 and 1910. Two have since been converted to other uses.

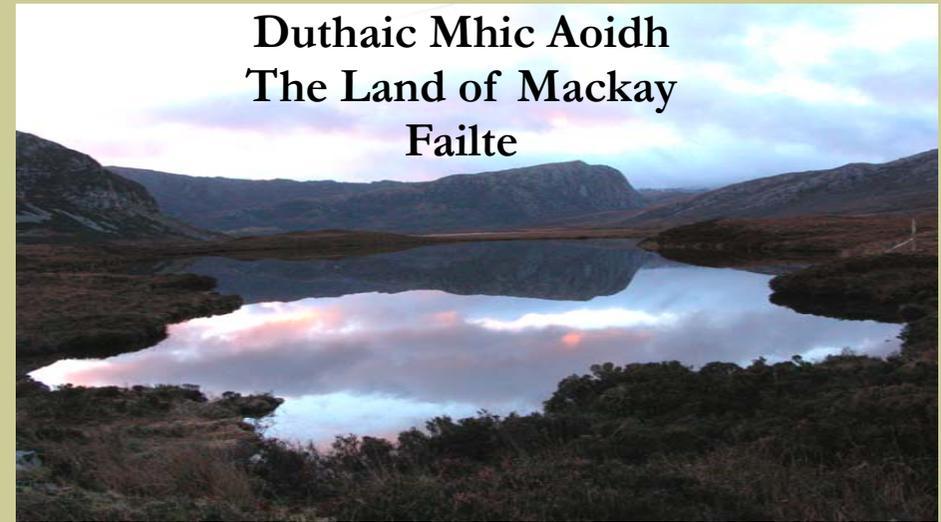
A rewarding diversion down a minor road between Bettyhill and Melvich reveals **Armada**, a hamlet of crofters' cottages tucked between Ardmore Point to the west and Strathy Point to the east.

This is only a sample of what is to be found in Mackay Country, which has a wealth of diversity in culture, tradition and custom. Remote with a rugged beauty unspoilt by commercial development, the area is a perfect respite from the stresses of modern living where it is possible to escape to spectacular tranquillity. A rich cultural heritage, internationally important habitats and wildlife in the open countryside come together in Mackay Country.



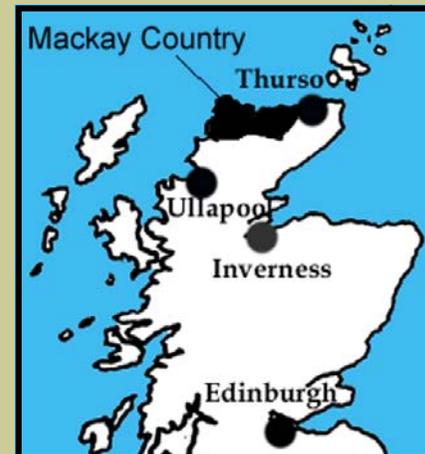
MACKAY COUNTRY

The most North westerly corner of the Scottish Highlands



Duthaic Mhic Aoidh The Land of Mackay Failte

The area known from at least the 11th century as the Province of Strathnaver, was absorbed into what is now known as the County of Sutherland in the 19th century. It was the traditional homeland of the Mackay clan, and the name is still very common in the area today.



"We value and respect our past as much as we strive to make our present and future secure and vibrant."

"We are on the edge, and what a beautiful edge we are on!"

At **Merkland**, freshwater lochs and wild moorland flank the A838 as it winds north-west to climb sharply at Kinloch and meet the elegant pinnacle of Ben Stack at Achfary



The south-western coastal gateway into Mackay Country is **Kylestrome**, lying on the A894 about 34 miles north of Ullapool. It is reached via the dramatic Kylesku Bridge, which spans Loch a Chairn Bhain against a spectacular mountain backdrop.



Just north of **Crask Inn**, a settlement in Strath Tirry on the A836, lies the sixth gateway to Mackay Country. The road dips gently as it follows the River Vagastie to Altnaharra and northwards by the western banks of Loch Loyal, with the summit of Ben Loyal rising to the west



The Mackay Country gateway on the B871 close to **Syre** is a haunting reminder of a dispossessed people, as the ruins of pre-clearance villages can be seen as the road follows the river north through remote Strathnaver to the coast.



Bettyhill is a crofting community set among the rocky green hills of the northern coastline, straggling along the side of a narrow tidal estuary and down the coast to two splendid beaches. Sitting at the head of the once heavily-populated Strathnaver valley, Bettyhill is a small and dispersed settlement between the villages of Tongue to the west and Melvich to the east. In a sheltered basin on the eastern side are the older parts of the village, such as the St Columba's Parish Church of Farr, now the Strathnaver Museum. The church was converted into a museum in the 1970s and is full of locally-donated bits and pieces, including panels by local schoolchildren telling the story of the Strathnaver Clearances. The Farr Stone, an early Christian Celtic stone, stands outside.



The village of **Scourie**, nestled on the west coast, is famed for the palm trees that grow in the garden of Scourie House, a consequence of the warming effects of the Gulf Stream. The crofting village lies in the centre of the parish of Eddrachilles and was once a Mackay stronghold. Excellent road connections lead on through dramatic scenery dominated by the peaks of Foinaven, Arkle, Ben Stack, Quinag, Sulven, Canisp and Ben More Assynt.

Kinlochbervie is a scattered village on the west coast, beautifully situated amid spectacular scenery on the north side of Loch Inchard. Village life centres around the harbour, situated on the sheltered eastern side of the Cnoc na h-Eannaiche peninsula on Loch Bervie. Kinlochbervie was once among Scotland's foremost deep-sea fishing ports.

Just west of the Kyle of Tongue is the turn-off towards **Melness**, Midtown, Skinnet, Talmine, Strathan, Portvasgo and Midfield, a little labyrinth of townships all around the coast and western head of the Kyle. From the junction at the Causeway, a minor road passes one of Scotland's more scenic cemeteries and on through the ribbon of settlements. A visit to Melness reveals many small, old townships and a diverse mixture of old, new, converted and restored dwellings clustered together in a hamlet with a distinct difference.



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Handa, an island with sea cliffs and one of the largest seabird colonies in north-west Europe, is a bird sanctuary managed by the Scottish Wildlife Trust. It lies a mile or two from the mainland opposite Scourie Bay. This tiny island, measuring about one mile by one-and-a-half miles, was once inhabited by twelve families and home to sixty-five people in 1841.



Mackay Country is made up of numerous communities and villages, all with their own unique character. Within these there are townships with both historical significance and a thriving identity today despite their very small populace.



One of the principal villages along the north coast, Tongue is situated on the sandy Kyle of Tongue in the heartland of Mackay Country. The village is an important junction where the road from Altnaharra, Lairg and the south meets the north coast.

Durness is the most north-westerly village on mainland Britain and the centre of the ancient lands of Clan Mackay. A crofting

village spread out on the coast, Durness is really a string of hamlets standing proud from the sea with sandy beaches and rocky coves.

Skerry is a small crofting community on the north coast, lying on the crescent-shaped minor road that meanders through stunning scenery before rejoining the A836. It occupies a rocky promontory between Tongue in the west and Bettyhill to the east – the name 'Skerry' is literally translated as "between the rocks and the sea". There are eleven townships scattered across the windswept moors and cliffs.



The most northerly edge of Mackay Country is found on the A838 at the Sutherland/Caithness border west of Reay on the north coast, where vast skies beckon the traveller westwards to pristine beaches and towering cliffs. In past times the border had been recognised at Drumhollistan and at the 'Split Stane', a cleft in the rock.



GATEWAYS TO MACKAY COUNTRY



Entering Mackay Country from Forsinard on the A897 in the heart of the Flow Country gives the only opportunity to travel through its wilderness by rail. The railway line from the tiny station at the RSPB nature reserve unrolls through Strath Halladale before the curving east to Caithness.



Mackay Country is a beautiful wilderness. The two coastlines – north and west – provide a stunning landscape of dramatic cliffs and golden beaches, backed by rugged mountains and barren moorland. Sparkling rivers, scattered lochs and an abundance of wildlife are set in a vast space filled with clean, invigorating air. Most of the area is above 200m in height and much of the land is only capable of use as rough grazing. Only a limited proportion of ground can be used for production of anything other than a narrow range of agricultural products. Peatland accounts for a good percentage and most of the remainder is held under crofting tenure. A very small area is given over to forestry.



The beaches all along the north coast are inlets of the sea. Some can be seen from the road whereas others are more isolated. Many are easily accessible, giving tranquil and peaceful seclusion. This is a huge land with a small population - the emptiest county in the UK - and large tracts of uninhabited space lie no great distance from the main road. The natural environment is one of Mackay Country's greatest strengths, featuring a diversity of flora and fauna untouched and unspoilt, reflecting that cultural and environmental values go hand-in-hand. Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and National Scenic Areas abound. The area is also rich in archaeological remains identified by Historic Scotland, such as forts, chambered cairns, brochs, castles, hut circles and deserted townships.

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Dun Dornaigil, an iron-age broch south of Ben Hope, is an excellent example of a Pictish broch with its triangular lintel. The walls of the broch are 14 feet thick and its internal diameter is 27 feet. Dun Dornaigil (Dornaidilla) is sited on the River Hope in Strath More, 10 miles from the turn-off on the A838 at Hope along the beautiful road to Altnaharra. This ruined broch has been carefully preserved, not restored, and is most impressive although it cannot be entered.

One-and-a-half miles south of Durness, where the road meets the shore of the Kyle of Durness, is the road end to Keoldale and the ferry to **Cape Wrath**. Access to the western side of the Kyle of Durness and the Cape is by ferry only, which links to a summer

minibus service for visitors. Cape Wrath, the most north-westerly and possibly the most remote point of mainland Scotland, lies 11 miles north-west of Durness. A red-rock headland rising 360 feet from the sea, topped by a lighthouse 70 feet tall, its cliffs support a huge seabird colony of puffins, fulmars, razorbills, guillemots and kittiwakes. The land between Durness and the lighthouse, the Parph, contains 207 square kilometres of moorland designated as a SSSI.



Strathnaver could not really be regarded as a settlement or village. Rather, it is the stretch of land that runs for 15 miles from Bettyhill following the River Naver south to where it joins Loch Naver just before Altnaharra. Once heavily populated, houses are scattered along the banks of the river, beside which the main road winds south of Bettyhill. From 1807 the Sutherland Estate systematically cleared the land of its inhabitants. Through Strathnaver can be seen the ruins of pre-clearance villages,

with an interpretive trail at Rossal, a village cleared in 1814.