Kenilworth

The story of the Kilcreggan Ferry

Ian McCrorie
**Foreword**

The MV Kenilworth has provided a reliable and safe service to the millions of passengers who have travelled on the ‘Kilcreggan ferry’ since its introduction to the route in 1979.

At SPT we are striving to improve accessibility for all on public transport. Today sees the Kenilworth’s last Saturday in service as we introduce the MV Seabus, a more modern vessel which the travelling public deserve.

I hope you enjoy reminiscing in some fond memories today as another piece of transport history fades from service and I hope you will all make the most of the new vessel.

A. Watson
Councillor Alistair Watson, Chair, Strathclyde Partnership for Transport

**Introduction**

The MV Kenilworth feels like a family member at Clyde Marine. The vessel is one of the oldest - if not the oldest - in regular passenger service in the British Isles and is fondly regarded by all our passengers and crews.

However, like our colleagues at SPT, we realise that ships, even the Kenilworth, cannot go on forever and we are looking forward to the inauguration of the new vessel next week which will bring a greatly improved travel experience for all our customers.

Enjoy your sail today and we look forward to seeing you on the new vessel.

A. Munro
Archie Munro, Clyde Marine Services Limited
Lucy Ashton departing Gourock with a Marchioness and a Duchess as company

Marchioness of Lorne arriving back at Gourock with Kilcreggan in the background
The ‘watering-place’ of Kilcreggan came into existence during the first half of the nineteenth century, as a direct result of improved communication between the city of Glasgow and the Clyde Coast brought about by steam navigation. The status of a community was greatly enhanced if it could boast its own pier and, on 8 July 1850, a “most substantial pier” was erected right at the heart of the village complete with “commodious waiting-rooms and other conveniences”. The main steamer service was from Greenock, either by an all-the-way steamer from the Broomielaw or one connecting with the trains at Customhouse Quay. These old paddle steamers called in on their way to the Holy Loch, Loch Long or Loch Goil. A further connection with Helensburgh was formed in 1869 when the North British Steam Packet Company started to ply on the route. From 1882 the NB terminal became Craigendoran.

It was in 1889 that Gourock first came into the frame. On 1 June of that year the Caledonian Railway station and pier opened and over the next fifty years Gourock gradually became the supreme railhead on the Firth. In the 1890’s, however, Kilcreggan was one calling place which saw the keenest competition among the rival railway companies. The teatime paddle steamers of the Caledonian Steam Packet Company from Gourock, the North British from Craigendoran and their rivals the Glasgow & South Western from Greenock Prince’s Pier (1869) recklessly raced to be the first to disgorge their passengers at the pier. Fortunately a signalling system had been put in place to prevent serious accidents and it is perhaps not unconnected that on 25 September 1897 a new Kilcreggan Pier was opened on the site of the old structure.

The best known ships to serve Kilcreggan were the Holy Loch steamers Caledonia (1889) and the Marchioness of Lorne (1935) from Gourock and many of the NB fliers from Craigendoran, like the Talisman (1896), Kenilworth (1898) and even the old Waverley (1899). Gradually two World Wars, the industrial unrest of the twenties and the Depression of the thirties ate away at the traditional traffic so that by the late forties passenger numbers were a fraction of what they had been. Fewer commuted daily from the coast to the city and ‘paw, maw and the weans’ taking a breather ‘doon the watter’ were not as omnipresent as in a previous age. Then in 1948 came the nationalisation of the railways and the amalgamation of the Gourock and Craigendoran fleets. Over the next few years more and more North Bank steamers were diverted via Gourock, the corollary being that Kilcreggan was increasingly bypassed.
Marchioness of Lorne (1935), departing Gourock

Hotspur II (1936) later to become Kenilworth

Life during wartime: Marchioness of Lorne in 1940
A coal-fired paddle steamer sailing between Gourock, Kilcreggan and the various Holy Loch piers was not the most economical way to serve the relatively isolated communities of the Rosneath and Cowal peninsulas. London-based British Railways, the commercial name of the operator, came to the sensible conclusion that small diesel vessels would be much more effective. Following a major reorganisation of Clyde services in the winter of 1951-52, BR placed two small motor boats on the Kilcreggan route. The Ashton and Leven (both 1938) also served Blairmore and Craigendoran. In bad weather, however, the Talisman (1935) would take over. In 1953, the “Lorne” was withdrawn from the station and replaced by one of a new quartette of motor ships, the Maid of Ashton. Although perhaps the new generation did not have the romantic appeal of their predecessors, they did in many ways offer a superior service, not least to winter travellers, thanks to their well-heated saloons. In the following year, car ferries were introduced to the Firth, but although a dual-purpose vessel to Kilcreggan was mooted from time to time, nothing came of the suggestion. It was around this time that the name of the legal owners of the ‘railway steamers’, The Caledonian Steam Packet Co. Ltd. (CSP) came to the fore once again.

During this period, in fact from 1930, another service operated from the slipway round the corner from the head of Gourock Pier to Kilcreggan. Owned by Ritchie Brothers, the prominent partner being Robert [Rab] Ritchie, the Port Star, Kempock Lad, Lady Jane Ritchie, Tiger and Westering Home at various times made the voyage across the Firth in under fifteen minutes and became something of an institution. (An additional ferry commenced operations in 1933 across the Gareloch between Rosneath and Rhu, thus opening up the Rosneath peninsula further). A relative, Walter Roy Ritchie, purchased the motor fishing vessel Granny Kempock (1941) in 1955 and commenced a ferry service between Gourock Pier and Helensburgh. This, then, was the scenario when the Kilcreggan Pier buildings were renewed and the pier itself strengthened in 1964. Roy Ritchie doubled his fleet in 1968 when he purchased the CSP motor vessel Ashton and later renamed her Gourockian.

The next significant change for Kilcreggan occurred on 26 May 1967. The CSP attempts to withdraw their Holy Loch service had been rejected by the Minister of Transport. To effect further economies, however, the Maid of Ashton was replaced by a much smaller motor vessel, the Countess of Breadalbane. This fine little ship had originally sailed on Loch Awe, but had been brought overland to the Clyde in 1952 – in what turned out to be an abortive attempt to place her on this very run in winter, when traffic was light. She now became the Kilcreggan and Holy Loch ‘steamer’, summer and winter. It is of interest that in this year too, Craigendoran Pier was closed in winter.
A busy scene at Gourock, Duchess of Hamilton, Countess of Breadalbane, Maid of Skelmorlie, The Second Snark and Rover, August 1970

Countess of Breadalbane on The Kilcreggan and Holy Loch run with Cowal at Gourock
On 1 January 1969 the CSP came under the ownership of a new quango, the Scottish Transport Group, dominated by the Scottish Bus Group. For the first time in eighty years, the ships were no longer railway-owned. The West Highland steamers of David MacBrayne Ltd were brought under STG control six months later. It was only a matter of time, as both companies now operated under the same umbrella, before an amalgamation took place. It came on 1 January 1973 when Caledonian MacBrayne Ltd was registered (strictly the CSP renamed). In the intervening four years, however, a great deal had happened with regard to Kilcreggan.

Many workers from Inverclyde were employed by the Ministry of Defence at Coulport, on the Loch Long side of the Rosneath peninsula. The quickest way for them to travel was by ship from Gourock to Kilcreggan. From 13 October 1969 the MoD chartered one of the “Maids” for this very purpose: she initially sailed from Gourock at 0715 and 0745 and brought the workforce back at 1710 and 2015. The return leg of each crossing was of course available for the travelling public.

The CSP finally got their way and the Holy Loch run ceased on 28 May 1971. From then on Kilcreggan – including the MoD or RNAD runs – was served by two “Maids” working in the Upper Firth. The Countess of Breadalbane was sold on to Roy Ritchie as a replacement for the Gourockian. She was renamed Countess of Kempock. For two years she carried on a service to Blairmore along with her Helensburgh runs. Meanwhile, one of the “Maids”, the Maid of Cumbrae, had been cleverly converted to a mini-car ferry and had been placed on the Gourock-Dunoon run as the secondary vessel. From November of 1972 she became the Kilcreggan ferry, sandwiching in calls on certain Dunoon runs and taking over the RNAD contract, her relief during her annual overhaul being one of the pioneer car ferries, at first the Cowal.

The shape of things to come was apparent in 1973 when the “Countess” regularly deputised for the Maid of Cumbrae on the teatime RNAD service, the latter being needed at Dunoon. The following year, 1974, saw the end of the CalMac ‘triangular’ Gourock-Kilcreggan-Dunoon runs with the “Maid”. She concentrated solely on Dunoon and the public Kilcreggan service was sub-contracted by CalMac to Roy Ritchie. Thus the Countess of Kempock became the main Kilcreggan ferry, relieved as required by the Granny Kempock, although as time went on the “Countess” was used more and more for cruising and the “Granny” took over the staple ferry run. Helensburgh was integrated into the roster (during the summer season only from 1977). For the first time ever, Kilcreggan now enjoyed a Sunday service. Later in the year two new stern-loading ferries appeared on the Gourock-Dunoon service. The Jupiter and Juno, affectionately known as the ‘streakers’ because of their extreme manoeuvrability, took their turn on the RNAD
contract work, the “Cumbrae”, and occasionally the original CSP car ferry Arran, being used only as a relief vessel.

Meanwhile the Ritchie Brothers ferry service had continued to give a valued and inexpensive service across the Firth. Until the winter of 1972-73 it had been scheduled all year round, but in 1973 and 1974 it became summer only. Sadly, a severe storm at the end of the latter year demolished the landing stage at Gourock and it was never repaired. That brought about the end of the venture, after almost half a century.

A new RNAD contract was negotiated late in 1978 to reflect the need for a vessel to be kept in commission purely for the Kilcreggan contract. More significantly, Roy Ritchie died in October that year. It soon became clear that his widow did not wish to continue trading in the long term. On Saturday 31 March 1979, then, the association of Ritchie and Kilcreggan came to an end, the Granny Kempock giving the last run. Both vessels were sold, the Countess of Kempock working out of Oban, Staffa and Iona before being transported overland yet again, this time to Loch Lomond, where she saw out her days as Countess Fiona.

Another company, Clyde Marine Motoring Co. Ltd., now entered the story. Managed by Captain A Dunlop [Archie] Munro from his headquarters at Greenock Princes Pier, this long-lived firm had specialised for most of the twentieth century in operating various tenders on the Clyde. The Rover, with a passenger complement of 120, had been built for the fleet in 1964, and was joined five years later by The Second Snark (1936), a former tender built for Denny’s the shipbuilders. Captain Munro started to operate short cruises, initially from Greenock’s East India Harbour, with his new acquisitions. Clyde Marine was approached by CalMac with a view to taking over the sub-contract for the Kilcreggan route. Coincidentally, the firm had been considering purchasing the Southampton-Hythe ferry Hotspur II (1936) which had been viewed at the Southampton Boat Show. Captain Munro agreed to CalMac’s terms and duly went ahead with the purchase. The new member of the fleet arrived on 22 March, but as she needed certain modifications to suit her for her new employment, she was not ready for the start of the new service on Monday 2 April 1979 and the Rover had to deputise for two days. When she did appear she had been renamed Kenilworth and painted in Clyde Marine Motoring colours. Helensburgh was added to her roster in summer and she also indulged in cruising in mid-afternoon, usually to the Holy Loch or Gareloch.

The Kenilworth was a 60 foot long vessel with a width of 21 feet. She had a displacement of 67 tons and could carry 80 passengers with two of a crew (although her certificate in the Solent had been for 300). Originally she was driven by 4L3 Gardner diesels and had a speed of about 9 knots.
Covered accommodation was on two decks forward, with seats arranged round each saloon. The lower deck saloon carried a bar. Passengers were not allowed on the upper deck behind the wheelhouse but there was adequate seating outside the deckhouse and at the stern.

The pattern of sailings whereby the Kenilworth gave the basic ferry service (including Helensburgh and cruising in summer) while the Jupiter and Juno took the RNAD contract sailings continued for some time. The Kenilworth’s usual relief was The Second Snark, while the ‘streakers’, following the withdrawal of first the Maid of Cumbrae and then the Arran, were replaced for part of the winter by the Pioneer, which sailed to Skye in summer. Disembarkation from the Pioneer was found to be rather slow at certain states of the tide and from December 1982 she was normally rostered for the morning Dunoon runs to allow the ‘streaker’ to attend to the RNAD traffic.

1983 saw the Monopolies & Mergers Commission look into Caledonian MacBrayne. The report asserted that the revenue earned by the RNAD contract undertaken by one of the car ferries was insufficient to break even. The recommendation was that one ‘streaker’ was to be laid up but the Scottish Office relented and there were no withdrawals after all. Meanwhile the financing of the Kilcreggan ferry changed. Instead of being sub-contracted by CalMac, Clyde Marine Motoring received a direct subsidy from the Strathclyde Passenger Transport Executive.

The end of the 1984 season saw a high fence erected on Gourock Pier leaving only a narrow pedestrian passage to gain access to the Kilcreggan and Dunoon ferries. The structure of the pier had deteriorated over the years and the multi-berth facility was no longer required. Repair or demolition was considered too costly. Around the same time the adjacent Admiralty Pier in Cardwell Bay fell into disrepair. The Kenilworth, which had normally berthed there overnight, now had to sail to and from Headquarters at Princes Pier every morning and night. The Kenilworth was given a completely new berth at Gourock forward of the linkspan berth in 1988.

By now the third of the ‘streakers’, the Saturn, had joined the Jupiter and Juno on the Kilcreggan runs: from 1986 the three interchanged rosters monthly. Cruising in the eighties was expanding. Doyenne of the Clyde cruising fleet was of course the preserved paddle steamer Waverley, which since her sale by CalMac and her subsequent recommissioning under the Waverley Excursions banner in 1975 had called regularly at Kilcreggan, notably on Fridays en route from Glasgow to Rothesay. The Kenilworth added Morning Coffee Cruises to her afternoon trips from 1985; CalMac operated the redundant Millport ferry Keppel on an extensive programme
Keppel approaching Kilcreggan with Waverley at pier

Kenilworth at Gourock with a diverted Isle of Arran (and Juno at Kilcreggan)

Saturn embarking RNAD depot workers at Kilcreggan

Pioneer’s last call at Kilcreggan, 13 October 1995

Keppel approaching Kilcreggan with Waverley at pier
of excursions from 1986 till 1992 while The Second Snark in 1983 commenced cruises from Princes Pier. All put into Kilcreggan Pier.

A new MoD charter, in addition to the CalMac RNAD sailings, commenced on 6 February 1989. Previously an MFV had transported the relatively small numbers of additional military personnel travelling to Coulport but from this date the contract was entrusted to Clyde Marine. All three of Captain Munro’s vessels were to be found on the run, which originally was at 0815/0830 and 1920/2020 Mondays to Fridays but later expanded into the weekends. Between runs the Rover or The Second Snark berthed at Princes Pier. When traffic was light, Clyde Marine vessels could also be found on some CalMac Kilcreggan sailings. By now, incidentally, the RNAD car ferry on the so-called ‘No 1A Roster’ was more fully employed at other times during the day, not just at Dunoon but also on the ever-expanding route between Wemyss Bay and Rothesay.

All RNAD involvement in the Gourock-Kilcreggan service ceased on 30 September 1995. From then on contract workers from Inverclyde to the armament depot at Coulport were transported, albeit circuitously, by coach. One consequence was that the return crossings, open to the public, were now vulnerable. Despite the residents of the Rosneath Peninsula lobbying their MP, CalMac finally ended their involvement with Kilcreggan on Friday 13 October, the last day of the summer timetable that year. The Pioneer gave the final call and blew three times on her whistle to bid farewell and signify the end of an era lasting over a hundred years.

Thanks to the subsidy from SPTE, Clyde Marine Motoring (renamed Clyde Marine Services in 2003) were able to continue providing a fine service between Gourock, Kilcreggan and Helensburgh with the Kenilworth. The time allowed on passage was increased from ten to twelve minutes in 1997. The veteran ferry, along with The Second Snark, was listed from 2001 in the National Register of Historic Ships in the United Kingdom. Over the years she had received much attention to keep her facilities up to date. 1988 had seen new toilets fitted while in 1999 a major overhaul at Rosneath included the fitting of new fuel tanks, having her shafts reconditioned, propellers repaired and her hull shotblasted. In 2000 she was re-engined with R6 Kelvin Diesels and her performance improved dramatically. Three years later her upper passenger saloon seating was improved with the provision of bus-type seating athwartships. Overhauls took place over the years not just at Rosneath but also at Clynder, Shandon and occasionally at Ardmaleish on the Island of Bute.

In her early days the Kenilworth was used quite extensively for charters. Often in the evenings or on Sundays, she sailed to Carrick Castle (Loch Goil), Rothesay or occasionally Dunoon. She was the favourite for the Paddle Steamer Preservation Society’s Christmas Cruise, normally to Carrick Castle with time
ashore. When the Queen Elizabeth 2 visited the Clyde, the Kenilworth, along with her consorts, was involved in excursions to see her; when the Tall Ships were based at Greenock in 1999 again all three Munro vessels ran sightseeing trips. Arguably her most unusual charters were in 1986 and 1996 when she sailed from Stobcross Quay to Renfrew to publicise the Clyde Walkway and on the river from Glasgow for a filming crew respectively. Clyde Marine, however, brought the Poole Scene (1974) from Portsmouth in April 1999: her superior accommodation and spaciousness made her the first choice for charters rather than the Kenilworth or The Second Snark. Regular Kilcreggan travellers were able to sample the delights of the new vessel when she was put on the ferry service for a spell in the spring of 2000, the Kenilworth being under repair after the Pioneer had collided with her at Gourock. The Poole Scene, incidentally, was renamed Cruiser in 2001 and painted for the first time in Clyde Marine colours. In 2003, the Kenilworth actually eschewed the company colour scheme to don the corporate maroon and cream colours of SPTE for four years.

2006 saw the Kenilworth celebrate her Diamond Jubilee, no mean feat for any ship. While traditionalists might enthuse over this, her internal accommodation was seen by many as ‘not fit for purpose’ any more. The result was that Clyde Marine Services ordered from Voyager Yachts, Southdown, a newbuild to replace her. The Seabus was duly launched in September 2006 and was seen to be rather a handsome vessel. At 64 feet (19.5 m) only fractionally longer than the ship she was replacing, the Seabus had breadth of 20 feet (6.2m) and was designed to carry a hundred passengers, 82 of whom could be seated in bus-type seating at any one time.

With her Gardner engines, she was reckoned to be a knot or so faster than the Kenilworth.

The changeover was due to take place at the end of March 2007. Following celebrations featuring the Kenilworth and her long and worthy service to the communities the purpose-built Seabus took over the Gourock-Kilcreggan route and a new era had begun. The veteran had sailed in her time with Clyde Marine over three quarters of a million miles, that is the equivalent of thirty times round the world at the Equator. In doing so, she had carried 2.1 million passengers which is not a bad record by anybody’s reckoning.
Facts and Figures

Route Miles:
Gourock - Kilcreggan 1.6 Nautical Miles.
Kilcreggan - Helensburgh 3.4 Nautical Miles.
Total  73.4 Nautical Miles - 1 Day's Sailings.

Weekly Mileage:
513.80 Nautical Miles

Patronage:
1,555 - Weekly  and 6,220 - Monthly

Annual Mileage:
26,717.60 Nautical Miles

Annual Patronage:
74,640

Patronage in her Clyde Career:
2.1 Million Passengers since 1979.
Photography: Tom Carreyette, Ian McCrorie (and collection), Andrew Lindsay, Allan Comrie. Design: Strathclyde Partnership for Transport, March 2007