



Viewpoint

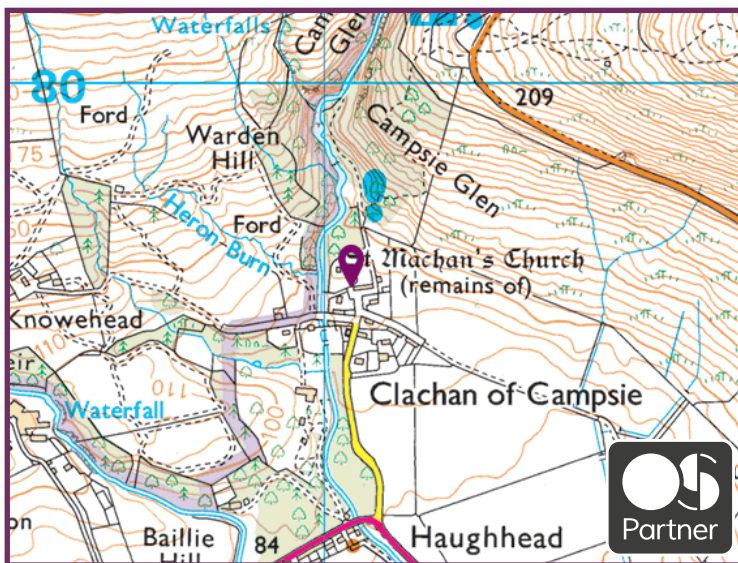
The Clachan connundrum



Time: 15 mins

Region: Scotland

Landscape: rural



Location:

Clachan of Campsie, East Dunbartonshire, G66 7AB

Grid reference: NS 61054 79610

Getting there:

Car parking and bus stop (FirstGlasgow X85 Glasgow-Campsie Glen) on site

Keep an eye out for:

Layers that look like steps on the surrounding hills. These are ancient lava flows, 300 million years old.

The Clachan of Campsie is a tiny hamlet standing where the Glazert Burn, a lively mountain stream, emerges from the wooded beauty of Campsie Glen.

There's a peaceful kirkyard with a picturesque ruined kirk (or 'church') and a square of buildings, mostly catering for tourists.

It really is a picture of sleepy rural calm.

So why did local poet William Muir write a lament for the decline of this beautiful spot in the early 1800s?



Today, the Clachan of Campsie feels like it has always been a quiet rural retreat - albeit one close to Glasgow. Its beginnings were certainly peaceful: the first resident we know about was St Machan, a 12th century Celtic saint who built a small chapel at the foot of the Glen. In 1175 a church was built near his grave. It was much remodelled over the centuries, and finally abandoned in 1828. It's now a picturesque ruin.

But these idyllic beginnings and its calm present couldn't be more different from how this tiny hamlet transformed in the 19th century. As well as an ecclesiastical centre, the Clachan became a focus for industry.

The Glazert Burn provided a convenient source of water and power, and so by the 1800s a meal mill (for grinding oatmeal), a blacksmith, a bleachfield (a field for spreading cloth to be bleached in the sun), a printfield (a place for printing cotton fabrics), a kiln, and a textile workshop with over fifty looms had grown up here! Labour and raw materials such as wool were all readily available locally, and help explain the Clachan's rapid growth at this time. In 1851 the bleachfield alone employed 50 people.

Such activity had drastic environmental implications, as Muir's poem *The Decay of Local Attachment* tells us:



*The Glazert stream that once so pure,
Did through thy vallies glide,
Meandering past the cottage door,
And by the hamlet's side.*

*Is now a poisoned putrid rill,
Diverted from its course,
To drive the massy fulling mill,
With all its frothy force.*

Bear in mind that the bleachfield probably used sulphuric acid or chlorine to speed the whitening process, and you can imagine what must have been spilling into the Glazert.

Add to that the smoke from the kiln and the ringing blows of the hammer on metal in the smithy and you can appreciate how shocking this industry must have seemed to the residents used to their quiet glen.

Later in the 19th century much of the industry moved east to Lennoxton as other forms of power became more cheaply available.



Nowadays the Clachan is quiet again. Cyclists whirr in to the renowned cycle shop in the square and the smell of coffee wafts from the café. Walkers start here for the Campsie Fells which soar upwards of 1,500 feet beyond the buildings. In the kirkyard the grass is soft under your feet, and you can hear the gentle rush of the waters of the Glazert, now clean and untroubled by industry.

However, the countryside is always changing and it's likely that new industries will present new challenges. There are already concerns about windfarms in the Campsie Fells and elsewhere in Scotland. To some they are a blight, whilst others argue they will simply become an accepted part of our landscapes. If William Muir were alive today, would the turbines prompt another lament?

Photos: Clachan of Campsie and St Machan's Kirk © David McVey / Bleachfields, Clachan of Campsie © welcometolennoxton.co.uk

Viewpoint created and photographed by David McVey. David is a writer specialising in the short story and non-fiction, particularly about history, walking and the outdoors. He is a Lecturer at New College Lanarkshire.