

An aerial photograph of a suspension bridge spanning a river in a forest. The bridge is made of wooden planks and is supported by two tall wooden towers. The surrounding forest is dense with trees in various shades of green and yellow, suggesting autumn. The river flows through the center of the gorge, with some rapids visible. The overall scene is a natural, scenic landscape.

*CORRIESHALLOCH*

# A BRIDGE THROUGH TIME

This year the suspension bridge across Corrieshalloch Gorge in the Highlands will be a remarkable 150 years old. **John Davidson** visits this extraordinary National Nature Reserve to learn the story of its engineering heritage

**WELL CARED FOR**  
The suspension bridge at Corrieshalloch Gorge may look relatively modern, but it celebrates its 150th anniversary this year.

**SPANNING THE AGES**

The Corrieshalloch Gorge suspension bridge was designed by Sir John Fowler, the engineer behind the Forth Bridge and the world's first underground railway, the Metropolitan in London.



**RIGHT:**  
Corrieshalloch Gorge National Nature Reserve is a haven for wildlife

## VISIT CORRIESHALLOCH GORGE

Corrieshalloch Gorge is 12 miles from Ullapool and 46 miles from Inverness. It is open to visitors all year round. The Gateway to Nature Centre and Cafe is open every day from 1 April onwards, from 9.30am to 3pm.

[nts.org.uk/corrieshalloch](https://nts.org.uk/corrieshalloch)

**'Within two steps of crossing the bridge, the view opens out – the vast chasm of the gorge; the waterfall crashing below'**

**P**earing over the edge of the narrow suspension bridge that hangs 60 metres above the dramatic Falls of Measach, it can be a little unsettling to feel yourself sway gently back and forth. The fact that this bridge has spanned the River Droma for no fewer than 150 years should give you some reassurance, however. And what's even more reassuring is to be told that it's meant to move that way!

The spectacular Corrieshalloch Gorge – nestled in a hollow between the main road to Ullapool and the Destitution Road to Dundonnell – is a true hidden gem. It's not only hidden from those who dash past on their way around the North Coast 500, but the 1.5km-long, 60m-high slot gorge, and its waterfalls, are hidden from sight until the moment you step onto that bridge deck.

A century and a half is an impressive lifespan for a bridge, especially in such a grand location. And as Aidan Bell, the National Trust for Scotland's estate supervisor at Corrieshalloch, highlights: 'The fact that we can experience this landscape in the same way it was intended to be experienced when the bridge was built 150 years ago – that is a tangible connection with history.'



**BELOW:**  
Trust staff Martin Hughes and Aidan Bell

**GATEWAY TO NATURE**

Corrieshalloch Gorge was designated a National Nature Reserve in 1967. 'There are 43 NNRs in Scotland and this is the smallest, but it's by no means the least spectacular,' explains Aidan. 'Because of where it is – in a narrow strip between two main roads – people drive past and don't even know it's here.'

'Even when you're standing next to it, it's not until you step onto the bridge that you fully appreciate the scale and the grandeur of the gorge.'

In April last year, the new Corrieshalloch Gateway to Nature Centre opened to the public, thanks to support from the Natural and Cultural Heritage Fund (led by NatureScot and part funded through the European Regional Development Fund) and from players of People's Postcode Lottery. This brought additional facilities and a new path to reach the bridge and the network of trails first created in the 19th century.

As we wander down through the native birches, Aidan points out the two previously hidden waterfalls – Eas Stapach and Eas Creagach – that can now be seen as you make your way to the main attraction. They tumble down steps of moine schist rock that splinters in cracks

DOUGIE CUNNINGHAM

to create blocks – a small-scale version of what we are about to see below us.

The land here was covered by huge glaciers during a series of ice ages. The cracks in the bedrock were caused by the weight of the ice above, which the glacier meltwater then exploited to make bigger, finally creating the gorge itself and the magnificent Falls of Measach. As we approach, I try to peer round the corner and get a glimpse of the falls, but there is nothing to see... yet.

Then, within two steps of crossing the bridge, the view opens out – in front, the vast chasm of the gorge, with the waterfall crashing through the rocks directly below. Behind, huge cliffs plummet from the edge of an otherwise sedate forest floor. Aidan says: 'The two things that always surprise people when they step onto the bridge are, one, that it moves slightly – which it's meant to! That's the way it functions as a structure. But also, this sudden abyss that opens out beneath you.'

**FEAT OF ENGINEERING**

Aidan Bell is well qualified to tell the story of the Corrieshalloch Gorge suspension bridge, as he has recently published a detailed book on its creator, 19th century engineer Sir John Fowler.

Perhaps Fowler's most famous construction is the Forth Bridge, although he also created the

world's first underground railway, the Metropolitan in London, which is still in use today as part of the London Underground. The same engineering skills he used on his many projects across Britain and the rest of the world were put to good use at Corrieshalloch and in the surrounding area.

Not far from the gorge, Fowler built himself a home, the now demolished Braemore House, in a dominating position 700ft up the hillside. He and his wife, Lady Fowler, also oversaw the planting of around 9 million trees on the estate, which was mostly barren open hillside when they bought it.

'What's really interesting about this wider cultural landscape is that Fowler used his engineering skills to adapt and modify it,' says Aidan. 'Whether that was damming lochs to provide water for hydro-electricity or building a series of miniature bridges and creating this network of paths, which didn't just provide access but also views and vistas through the landscape.'

In the 18th and 19th centuries, the Romantic movement and the notion of the 'sublime' among artistic and intellectual circles encouraged an appreciation for wild landscapes and the value of immersing oneself among them. Today, Aidan would love people to come and visit the gorge and experience something of the emotions that those 19th century thinkers were seeking, while also



**'When you're standing on this gently swaying bridge and the waterfall is beneath you, you're right in the action'**

appreciating the value of the bridge's engineering heritage. 'In one sense, the bridge itself is a feature in the landscape to be looked at – from the viewing platform, when you look back up the gorge, you see the graceful span of the bridge, and it makes a very nice artistic composition,' he says. 'But at the same time, standing on the bridge really immerses you in the moment.'

'What I often say to people is to consider the significance of the bridge's location – if the purpose was simply to get from one side to the other, Fowler could have just put a conventional

**ABOVE:**  
The bridge offers a wonderful outlook across the gorge

**BELOW:**  
The Gateway to Nature Centre offers facilities including toilets and a cafe

bridge in further up the river. But by putting it over the gorge, and creating a suspension bridge as well, visitors peer into the abyss from the edge of safety.

'You're standing on this gently swaying bridge and the waterfall is beneath you, you're right in the action, right in the picture. That's what Romanticism and the sublime were all about.'

#### CARING FOR OUR HERITAGE

The historic significance of the suspension bridge means that today it is B-listed by Historic Environment Scotland, and the Trust has a legal duty to maintain it. It is regularly inspected and cared for by a team of experts, including structural engineers who are more used to working on lighthouses. All of this comes at a cost of around £15,000 a year just to look after the bridge, and many visitors are surprised to hear its true age given its carefully maintained, fresh appearance.

Corrieshalloch's operations manager Martin Hughes says: 'I think that's a testament to the National Trust for Scotland, just how much we care for our places and care for that bridge. It does help having someone like Aidan who is particularly passionate about it, as we all are.'

Martin is thrilled at the success of last year's project to open the Gateway to Nature Centre,

which has brought more visitors to Corrieshalloch National Nature Reserve – the numbers exceeded 100,000 last year – but he is also very conscious that its famous suspension bridge does have a limited lifespan.

'It's difficult to answer how long it will last, because there are a lot of complexities to it, but we do know that at some point we will have to have a plan B,' says Martin. But he's ambitious that there may eventually be opportunities to do even more exciting things at Corrieshalloch, enthusing: 'If we could put a second bridge in, we could then create a loop, so you come across the bridge and up the back of the gorge here to another bridge.'

For now, investment in the Gateway for Nature Centre has created three full-time jobs and other seasonal roles at Corrieshalloch – a significant boost for this part of the rural Highlands. There are electric car charging points, motorhome waste disposal facilities and, importantly, public toilets. 'We're providing

much-needed facilities and infrastructure that the Highlands are in need of,' Martin explains, proudly adding: 'We've also got the best toilets on the west coast of Scotland!'

After visiting the suspension bridge, it's worth taking the time to wander around the stunning circular route created by following Lady Fowler's Fern Walk above the gorge to a viewpoint that overlooks Loch Broom. New interpretation is being added to the path network and landscaping works are due to be completed soon, too.

In the meantime, ongoing work to care for the bridge continues, and Aidan is grateful to everyone who supports it. 'It's through people's membership and admission fees that we are able to fund that conservation work, so that people can still experience Corrieshalloch in the same way it was intended to be experienced 150 years ago.'

Aidan Bell's book *Fowler's Bridges* is available now from [biblio.co.uk](http://biblio.co.uk)

## SPANNING THE CENTURIES

SOME OF THE OTHER HISTORIC CROSSINGS IN THE CARE OF THE NATIONAL TRUST FOR SCOTLAND



#### Brig o' Doon, Alloway

If you're visiting Robert Burns Birthplace Museum, don't miss the original 15th century cobblestone bridge, as featured in Tam o' Shanter.



#### Victoria Bridge, Mar Lodge Estate

This B-listed lattice girder bridge crosses the River Dee. Two years ago, we dismantled it piece-by-piece before refurbishing and reinstating it.



#### Green footbridge, Killiecrankie

This 1960s footbridge across the River Garry replaced an 18th century bridge in the same location. It forms part of the Pitlochry path network and is an iconic sight in many photos from Killiecrankie.



#### The Hermitage Bridge, near Dunkeld

A Category A listed structure, this stone bridge crosses the River Braan. It was built back in 1774 for John Murray, 3rd Duke of Atholl, and is close to Ossian's Hall at The Hermitage.

