Fonn diasach, 's mor a b'fhiach e
Gu fiadhach 's gun i,
Aite siobhalt' ri doineann,
Is nach criothnaich a'ghaoth.

Country rich in deer and cattle
And in sprouting corn,
Land protected from the tempest,
Sheltered from the storm

Rob Donn MacKay (translation Ian Grimble)

Storm Over Cape Wrath
by Nicola Poole

Evoke a Sense of Place

Rocks from the dawn of time

- **Moine Rocks:** Metamorphosed sandstones and mudstones; c. 980 million years old.
- **Durness Limestone:** Pale and dark grey limestone, commonly with caves, clints and grykes; c. 480 million years old.
- **Lewisian Gneiss:** A stripy, pink to grey-green rock, with distinct Scourie Dykes. At c. 3000 million years old the oldest rocks of Britain.
- **Basal Quartzite and Pipe Rock:** White to pink quartzite with worm burrows ('pipes') in the Pipe Rock; c. 500 million years old.
- **Faults**

British Geological Survey
NATURAL ENVIRONMENT RESEARCH COUNCIL

Pebble Route 4

North West Highlands GEOPARK
Iar-Thuath na Gàidhealtachd

The far north westerly tip of the British mainland is possibly our best kept secret. Green rolling hills give way to rugged, colourful cliffs and white sandy beaches with turquoise waters. Most, like Balnakeil, Sangomore or Ceannabeinne, are just a few minutes' walk from the road.

This really is as far North West as you can get on a road in the British Isles without catching the small ferry from Keoldale to Cape Wrath.

Earning a living is hard here and there is no doubt that the reason Durness is still such a vibrant community is due to the hard work and determination of the diverse mix of families from many different backgrounds. The underlying limestone produces a naturally fertile grassy oasis in a landscape otherwise characterised by peat, making cultivation particularly viable (and as the Norse found out, for deer grazing).

Limestone isn't the only rock here, in fact, in just the c.25km^2 covered by Pebble Route 4 there are 19 different types. Perhaps this is why Durness is teaming with wildlife too. From puffins to minke whales, over 800 species have been recorded.

The Moine Thrust crosses the beach at Sangomore and is then seen again at **Faraid Head**. Thrusting happened deep within the Caledonian Mountains 400 million years ago as the Iapetus Ocean closed up. The rocks along the thrust faults become very ground up and stretched due to the many kilometres of movement that occurred on them. You can see this at exposures on Balnakeil beach.

At the east end of the route go down to the beach to see Lewisian gneiss that is much pinker than in Assynt. The banding here is almost vertical with veins of pegmatite cutting through it. If you follow the Ceannabeinne clearance village trail and continue down to the beach there you will see another cave. Lookout for the Basal quartzite forming its roof and possibly otter prints in the sand.

Explore Deep Time

The end of the mountains

If you start your journey at **Ceannabeinne** you can walk down to the **Tràigh Allt Chailgeag** beach and marvel at the colourful, banded and folded Lewisian Gneiss. These rocks are amongst the oldest in the world and were formed from the early crust of the Earth. They have been buried deep underground, heated and squeezed to form the beautiful swirling patterns we see today.

Ceannabeinne means the 'end of the mountains' and if you climb to the top of Beinn Ceannabeinne and look south on a clear day it's easy to see why as the long line of mountain sentinels face the Atlantic Ocean. However the Gaelic name is particularly apt, as this is the place where geologists discovered that the Scottish mountains were once part of the Appalachian mountain range in North America.

Stories from a working landscape

Head west towards Durness village and you'll come to a bend in the road where you may note several cottages framed by lines of dry stone walling running down to the sea. These strips of land form the traditional crofting 'in-bye', areas designated for growing vegetables or fodder. Today most crofters earn a living by working in some other sphere as well as keeping animals or growing produce but there are incentives available for making the land more productive such as through planting native trees. **Balnakeil craft village** was set up in 1963 to accommodate skilled craft workers, many of whom own crofts in the area. The project was incredibly successful and today you can meet the many local artisans and browse their outstanding galleries.

Traigh Allt Chailgeag NC443654

A limestone chasm

Continue your journey and pass Smoo Cave at the end of a long inlet (geodha). The roof of the cave system has gradually collapsed to give the current inlet. The slightly acidic Alt Smoo river has cut into the soft limestone here forming a deep cleft. The word 'Smoo' is actually from the Norse 'smjuga' meaning creek or cleft. The river drops from the road level down a sink hole forming waterfalls within Britain's largest limestone sea-cave accessible by land. There's a boat trip into the cave system and many myths and legends have grown around its dark, mysterious depths. Perhaps some of these started when the first north coast settlers cooked and ate their shell-fish here 10,000 years ago...

Durness village is a bit further along the road, once you get here, take the right turn towards Balnakeil Craft Village. Why not call in on your way to Balnakeil beach?

Balnakeil beach

Baile na cille as it is spelled in Gaelic means the 'place by the church', which likely refers to the ruined kirk near the carpark at the end of the road. According to Vatican records, the church dates back to at least 12th century. From here there's a few options for walks. Head towards the golf course for a clifftop walk and look out for incredibly rare Scottish Primroses, or cross the beach to Faraid Head, where the cliffs rise to 100m above the sea. A Viking boy's grave was discovered by chance in the sand dunes here in 1991. He was buried with a brooch pin, comb, beads, a sword and shield and gaming pieces dated to the 10th century AD.

Encourage Stewardship

Balknakeil NC391687

Photography: Kevin Arrowsmith