

Shafting Ardverikie – the fate awaiting its lochs, corries, bens and fine old hill paths

Description

This is a fuller version of a story in Scottish Mountaineer this autumn, which takes its cue from the long-running – New Twists for Old Hills – series there.

The literal – shafting – is the driving of miles of tunnels through the Ardverikie Munros, linking hugely enlarged lochs for a Pumped Storage Hydro (PSH) scheme known simply and unmemorably as – EARBA – ([see here](#) for previous post and [here](#) for a link to a Powerpoint illustrating all the current PSH proposals).

The real shafting is of two of our finest hill lochs, with their wildlife, and of several wonderful old made paths, and of the unspoiled ridges and bealachs linking the Ardverikie Three, grand Munros on the Badenoch – Lochaber divide.



These Munros are readily accessible from Moy (Luiblea) on the A86 and thus make a popular long day's round:

- **Beinn a' Chlachair** 1087 m a sprawling blockfield, scalloped by noble corries;
- **Mullach Coire an Iubhair** 1049 m the proper name as per Munro's Tables, and now on the 25k map, for one of the numerous Geal Charns;
- **Creag Pitridh** 924 m the perky outlier on the NW flank of Iubhair.

The first two are linked by the high col of **Bealach Leamhain** (almost 750m) above which a shoulder will be crossed (at 800m) by permanent heavy-duty access tracks to reach the top reservoir, destroying the old paths which encircle Loch a' Bhealaich Leamhain.

This 'Earba' scheme has been consulted upon locally and is now awaiting a decision by the mysterious Energy Consents Unit (ECU) at Scottish Government. [Highland Council asked the ECU for more time to comment, was refused by the ECU and to date has submitted no comments on the application]. But at the big lay-bys on the A86, there is nothing to tell the numerous hillwalkers, fell-runners, mountain bikers, and wanderers of this enormous project, who come from far and wide, and will never have heard of it until they see it being constructed. And I might never have known either, but for a colleague who persuaded me to visit while these hills and lochs were still pristine.

Lochan na h-Earba is not one of those names that rolls off the tongue let alone sticks in memory. Yet it is over 6 km long, more than half the length of Loch Laggan, if divided half-way by a remarkable large fan called Am Magh, spewed out in spates by yet another Moy Burn (*magh/moy* just meaning 'the flats'). It is handsomely and ruggedly framed by the two Binneins, Shuas and Shios, on the north, and by Creag a' Mhagh and Creag Pitridh itself on the south.



Mullach Coire an Iubhair awaits from Binnein Shios across Lochan na h-Earba, Binnein Shuas on the right, Creag Pitridh is the pimple. The pony path heads up from the green camping grounds of Am Magh, which will entirely disappear.

I had not been this way before before, and cannot recall even glimpsing it from surrounding Munros, concealed as it is in its narrow trench. The loch is open at both ends, as it occupies a glacial breach of

the Speanâ??Spey divide: water flows east through it only to return west via Loch Laggan, such are the vagaries of the ice-baffled River Pattack.

My vague impression of â??Earbaâ?• was thus of a probably bleak wind funnel of a side valley that didnâ??t go anywhere I wanted and had no obvious attractions in itself. As I am finally enticed in there, over a fine weekend this May, how unhappy I am to be confounded. Nor had I realised that Earba is known to the cognoscenti for wild camping, perhaps the best spots in this entire area. So we have decided to camp in here, to listen out for the snipe drumming of a night, and to shorten a hill day in the uninvited company of Mr H, my newly-acquired hernia. The open west end has good grassy swards, and a fine sandy beach, but is a bit public; indeed, two tents are there next day. We bike on along the good track to Am Magh, where the lush grassy fan attracts another bike-camper; we find a secluded spot above the gravelly shore. This we agree is one of the loveliest places we have ever passed a night, in complete tranquillity, embraced by a quartet of striking hills â?? Shuas of course sporting the Ardverikie Wall, Shios our evening grandstand for the unimaginably long skyline of Meagaidh, a gentle sunset behind it. And yes, we do eventually hear the snipe.



Ardverikie Wall, the clean slab on the right of the crag, is regarded by many as the finest â??severeâ?• in Scotland

Likewise, in the high corries above, **Loch aâ?? Bhealaich Leamhain** rolls even less freely off the tongue, sticks even less readily in the memory. How many of those who glimpse this pearl while doing the Ardverikie Round could name it? Yet it is finely set, below the bealach between the Big Two from which it takes its name, the largest corrie lochan in the Alder massif. It has a distinctive clean-lined pear-shaped serenity that has captivated many a photographer, notably when black within white snows, or glimpsed through mists.

And so we set out to pay possibly our last respects to its serenity. And of course we will make a New Twist out of it while we are at it. Here we must mention a fresh field of research â?? â??stalkerpathsâ?• as we like to twist their name too, making the point they are properly called â??pony pathsâ?•, made chiefly to get the carcasses off the hill more efficiently â?? and for recreational enjoyment for non-stalking guests (as the redoubtable Grampian Club and Munro Society have been first to hear, both thanks to the enthusiasm of Alf Barnard). Ardverikie has one of the very finest webs of these made paths, round all the hills and through the passes. It has just two short spur paths nipping up onto the Munros, both late extras, for us to explore â?? are they still go-able ?

From our tent door, we stroll up to the apex of Am Magh, and head up a little-used â??stalkerpathâ?•, mostly followable despite the ravages of Moy Burn spates. It climbs out above the ravine heads to become a splendid ruled line, rising up the moor and slanting in to a high col, where it carries on over and down into Pattack. Our short spur is clear â?? it starts as a well-made bench behind the skyline, crosses over at the foot of the north shoulder, and traverses into Coire an Iubhair at waist height, just below its craggy wall. In the corrie head, the path bears up the steep grass to emerge on the brow of the Mullach plateau, between Munro and Top: at 1080m, this is a rare high-riser. Or not quite â?? as is not uncommon, the path stops just short, in a little hollow, perhaps with a scooping and revetting of a seating place sheltered from the sou-westerlies.

This is one of the most delectable of such made hill paths â?? perhaps intended more for walkers than ponies, with one awkward spot where it has been chiselled into the base of a crag. Every variant detail for getting water across the path is on display. There are no traces of human passage â?? the deer keep it handily alive, as so often, in a neat turning of tables.

And there they are, all 160 hinds and calves, on the long residual snowbank which buries the slanting notched line â?? for these paths were of course only really required for the July-October Highland Season. The deer are drifting to and fro to keep cool like a murmuration, only leaving as we near, down a mansard-slope steepening so much that the less sure-footed calves slip and slither comically down it, ending in heaps.



Entering Coire an Iubhair Mor, path traversing in below the main crag, Mullach on the right. Photo credit David Jarman

I have predicted that our way might be barred thus, recalling a visit decades ago, when we opted to go up the north shoulder. But this time there is a path to be vindicated, no turning back! The main snowbank is frozen hard, impossible to address without spikes, and it runs into the crags at each end, unturnably. But a little outcrop suggests a weak spot midway, thinner and with less of a steep toe – my colleague kicks steps up it which, as usual, are too widely spaced for a stiff old crock to avail of; bare hands manage to dig sufficient holds to progress up it (with Mr H keeping himself well zipped).

Looking down where the path disappears into the snow, you would not dream of descending what looks like a cornice precipice.

In our exhilaration, we forget once again to take in the Top, and cross over the sturdy Mullach, delighted with a ‘New Twist’ worthy of the name, despite its following a made path almost to the top. Fell runners come and go; hillwalkers are on Beinn Chlachair already. Barring the forestry filling the Spean basin, and some giant turbines glimpsed on the distant, unhappy Monadhliath, our long views all around are free of modern intrusions, the vast canvas of the Highlands as they should be, balm to wearied souls.



Loch Bhealaich Leamhain. The precipice path is marked, showing the branch up onto Beinn Chlachair. It will become the main access track to a 100-metre high dam. Photo credit David Jarman.

And now, that pearl of a lochan comes into view. We descend the block slopes, and briefly join the Ardverikie Round to cross Bealach Leamhain, where another fine stalkerpath rises to a notch at 800m on the broken nose of Beinn Chlachair. The Pony Path for so a dump of horse dung declares it still to be here follows a splendid rocky bench, with a delicious spring bubbling onto it through saxifrage beds, nectar in this dry spell. Sadly, Mr H says he's seen quite enough for today, needs a lie-down, so we pause on the brow to contemplate the imminent extinction of this priceless lochan, then turn back. Yet another path still good in places takes us over the Creag Pitridh col and down Coire Mhagh to our tent.

EARBA PSH

When the plans for Earba were submitted, Mountaineering Scotland's email newsletter invited comments on the biggest **Pumped Storage Hydro** (PSH) schemes yet proposed in Britain. Apparently, views were divided rather evenly (as so often happens) between those who welcomed a noble sacrifice in the cause of climate change targets, and those who didn't.

Earba has three key components impacting our mountain landscape :

- The twin lochs of **Lochan na h-Earba** will be drowned by large dams either end of the through valley, raising the top water level by over 20 m. Our amazing, special Am Magh fan will disappear, as will the haunts of sandpiper and of snipe¹, along with the best sheltered winter grazings for those native inhabitants, the wild deer. And all these good camping spots will vanish, irreplaceably.

- As for that pearl, **Loch a' Bhealaich Leamhain**, a massive dam 100 m high protruding way out from the natural line of the hills will raise it almost to the level of the Bealach. That's three times the height of the massive-enough Cruachan (The developer's visualisation shows only the top quarter of the dam, with a brimful lake not the daytime drawdown scar behind a metallic-sheen curve of Italian sports-car elegance). This dam will catch the light and the eye, prominent from the near Alder massif and the far Drumochter-Gaick rims,
- Most damaging of all but seldom realised until they're there are **access roadways** of industrial scale, for construction and maintenance, zigzagging all over the slopes of Creag and Coire Pitridh, slicing across Bealach Leamhain and that notch, and destroying the pony path along the rock shelf with 8-10 metre deep cuttings probably 15-20 metres wide (the developer's visualisation well, there isn't one; no-one seems to have noticed this wee detail). All walkers crossing the Bealach between the Big Two Munros will have to cross that track and skirt the clutter of installations controlling the huge pipes linking the two reservoirs. Construction scars will persist for years especially as enforcing any restoration conditions seems impossible these days.



Loch a' Bhealaich Leamhain, with the dam and raised shoreline (with daily drawdown zone in brown), and the permanent access track (photo from below Carn Dearg by Nick Kempe)

Save the Ardverikie lochs and corries

A huge antique wallmap in the estate office at Ardverikie manages to depict lochs Earba and Leamhain for what they indeed are the most striking features in this noble mountain landscape, hard on the main watershed of Scotland (pre- its Ice-age breachings). But sadly their names cut little mustard (although not even the magic of Etive could save that glen from run-of-river despoliation).

On delving into their meanings,

- **earba** is an obscure term for female deer, such as would find succour along its shores,
- **iubhair** is the yew which could hardly have grown up here and indeed is not known on Ardverikie, wild but could also mean yew wood, as in the bow or even the arrows; could some

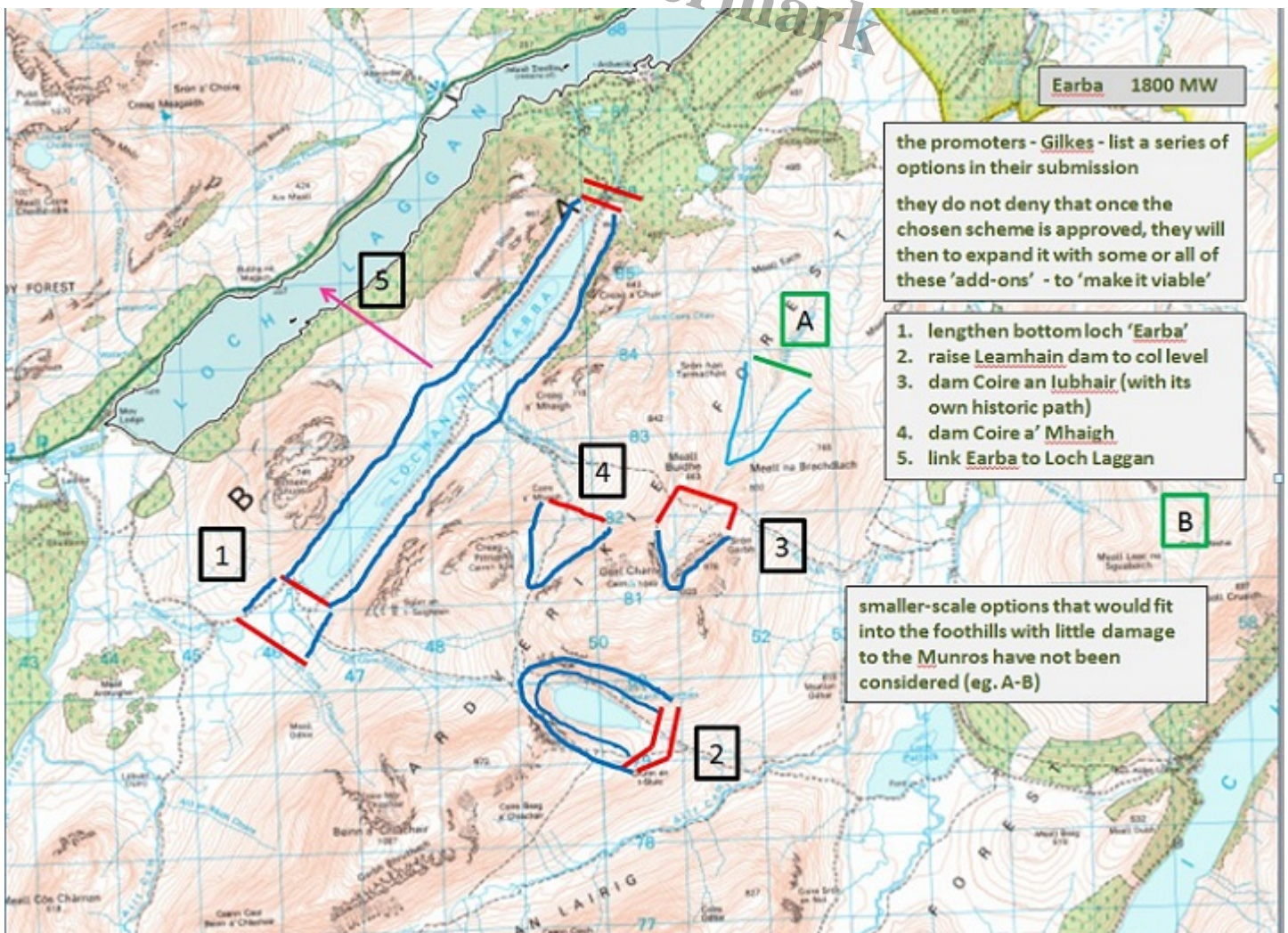
bow, lost, broken, buried, triumphant, have given us this legend-name ?

- **leamhain** is the elm, even more implausibly ah, as so often, the place-naming efforts of the OS First Edition have been over-ruled, it was originally **Bealach Sleamhainn** the slippery pass. As indeed it could well have been, before the pathmakers eased the way. And indeed, one for slippery customers to smuggle things through.

Save the Ardverikie Munros

Indeed, it's not just the lochs: with all the heavy-duty access roadways, at almost no point on the classic round will you not have this scheme full in your face. You will be in the midst of an Energy Production Zone. The regular way off Creag Pitridh, down grass and boulder slopes, will now follow industrial zigzags. Even in depths of winter these vehicle tracks will be in frequent use - imagine what it will take to keep that rock shelf cutting free of snowdrifts (why they cannot access the Leamhain dam from Pattack side, which already has a fullscale road to the big new run-of-river hydro there, they will not say).

And trust us, it won't end there. Buried deep in the wheelbarrow-load of documentation is a page on the alternative options they were required to evaluate. These include:



1. lengthening the Earba reservoir both ways, with the SW dam projecting well out into the hummocky moor and taking in a small loch there;
2. raising the Leamhain dam to take its shoreline right up to the col
3. and ??? drowning our beautiful Coire an Iubhair, with three dams cutting off overflow points around its apron ??? our ???New Twist??? path vanishing save where it emerges below that snowbank.

Also considered ??? (4) a third hill reservoir, in Coire a??? Mhagh, (5) linking Earba itself to Loch Laggan.

We predict that, sooner or later after ???Earba??? is consented by the Energy Consents Unit (no scrutiny by public inquiry or by parliament, just a ???sign-here??? in some minister???s overnight box), the developers will be back. They will argue that to make it viable, they will need to increase the capacity of the project ??? making full use of the large lower reservoir capacity, the costly underground power cables, and the new switching station at Laggan linking to Beaully-Denny (so convenient ??? this is why this scheme is a front-runner).

On being asked whether these ???extras??? might come forward ??? as we see with windfarm extensions ??? the developers could not deny it. To quote: ???our current focus is on the existing proposal??. So, no corrie, no glen, on Ardverikie will be safe ??? and the precedent will have been clearly set, nor will any Munro anywhere, remember how ???Run-of-River??? went like wildfire.

??? ??? ???

Of course we all agree that resisting global heating is vital, and pumped storage can play a part to play in balancing fickle renewable sources and demand surges (there are other means). But the Ardverikie Three are a major Munro group visited by thousands ??? they should not be casually sacrificed, at the whim of a particular landowner and developer joining forces to promote ???Earba??. Bearing in mind the same developer has an even more blatantly conspicuous mega-PSH scheme in the heart of the Quoich Munros, ???Fearna???

This is not the place for all the arguments ??? see the previous blogpost and also one by Jane Meek on UK Hillwalking ([see here](#)). But please don???t imagine that a handful of mega-PSH and we???re there at Net Zero, job done, relax, enjoy all the remaining hills. Because it is a rapidly moving target, as electricity demand goes exponential ??? think data storage centres, AI, bitcoins, and more as yet unimagined to come. So, as ever, just ???follow the money??. Are the shafts being driven through the mountains really motivated by ???saving the planet??? ??? or are the mountains basically being shafted for profit, and their lovers along with them ?

??? ??? ???

A handsomely illustrated volume, the **Memoirs of Finlay Mackintosh**, stalker on Ardverikie and Ben Alder in its heyday was published in 2020:

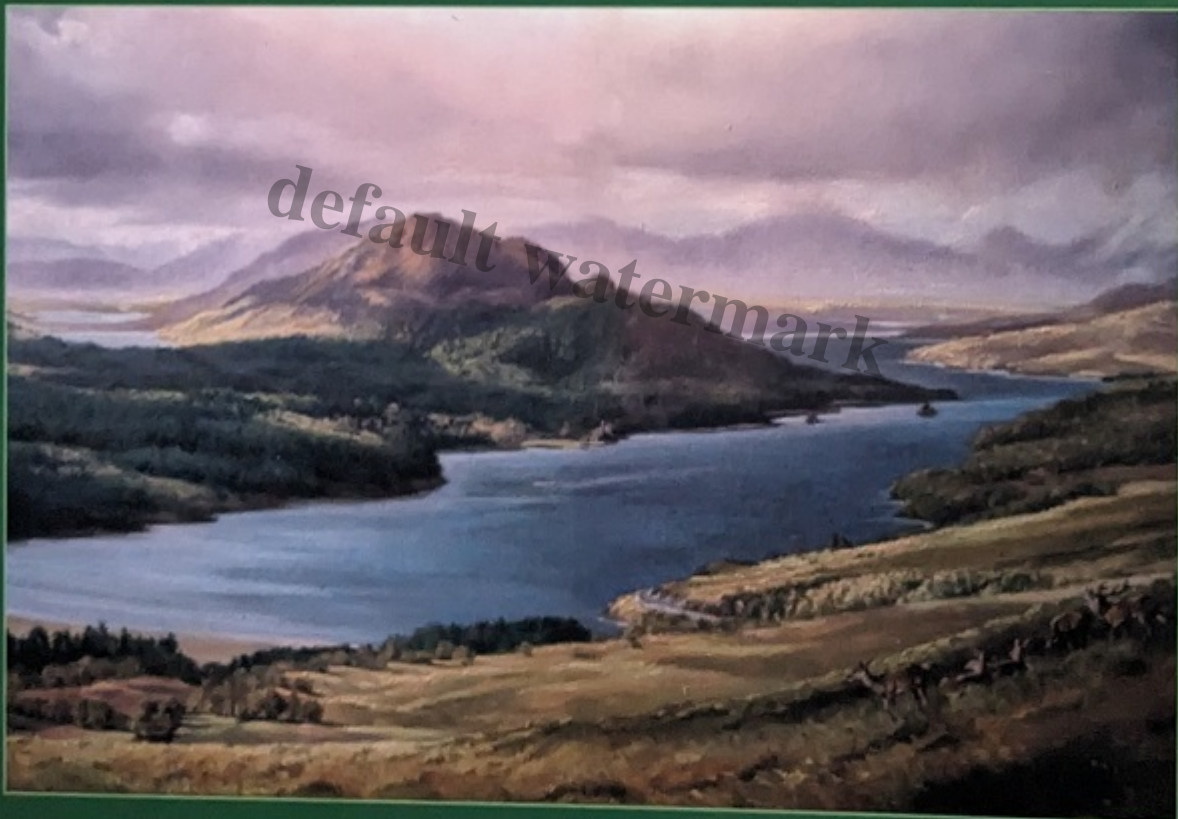
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Seasons

*The Memoirs of Finlay Mackintosh
a Badenoch Stalker*

1883–1966



Edited and compiled by

RICHARD SIDGWICK

We

glimpse how these paths were used by the garrons, and the deer stalked from way above them. And we learn that a young master, back from WW1 and out for a picnic-camp with friends, suggests that these short late additions be cut, just to make it easier to nip up the two 'home Munros'. My own diaries remind me that back in 1987, after we were barred from the lubhair one by that late snow bank, we relished that remarkable rock-shelf-path² from which our last glance back at Loch Bhealaich Leamhain was a memory of glittering ripples.

There is another handsome, illustrated volume³ recently published 'Ardverikie Castles in the air'. It draws on the old records to chart the assembling in around 1870 of half-a-dozen Lochaber-Badenoch properties into one of the largest sporting estates ever. One might imagine that Sir John Ramsden wealthy beyond dreams simply from owning most of boom-town Huddersfield might not be the most admirable figure. Yet the book opens with his letter to his mother, at age 38, breaking the news of his ambition:

My dear Mother

*We are building such a delightful Castle in the Air that I can bottle it up no longer but you must be mute as a fish and not tell anyone a word about it. [a castle] and a square block measuring 12 miles every way, and **beautifully set in and surrounded by lakes and mountain ridges** so that there would be little room for further coveting And then, besides the **beauty & vastness of the whole thing** it has the charm of being **absolutely untouched** there is not a public road or footpath anywhere in the forest, & the woods have never been improved or cut down or done anything to. **It is a real slice of primeval wilderness.** No stone wall or bobbin-mill, or other barbarities of civilization!*

Most Affectingly,

JWR [John William Ramsden bold type added]

What would he think of his successors, as they go about curating his great, absolutely untouched treasure now ours to share with such casual disregard for his values, his dreams ?

For 'Ardverikie' a name well-known from Monarch of the Glen days and many a film seeking that iconic Highlands backdrop has a seductive website extolling the glories of its landscape heritage, and of its being a rare estate still in the hands of its founding family.

Footnotes

[1] the developers' own survey suggests there may be just three nesting pairs of snipe here, how many on the whole of Ardverikie who knows, but this with Loch Pattack is the place you would go and hope to hear them; they will not re-establish on the artificial reservoir shoreline worn into loose peaty debris banks.

[2] both paths across the flanks of Coire an Lubhair Mor and Coire Bhealaich Leamhain have now been registered as of historic interest by Canmore (HES) and by Highland Council (HER)

[3] both volumes created by Richard Sidgwick, former factor to many West Highland estates, including Ardverikie and "Sixty glorious seasons" published with help from Wild Land Ltd.

Category

1. Other parts Scotland

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