

For the first time, people can make a complete circuit of Loch Leven, Kinross-shire, on a trail which links a wide range of cultural and historical sites. The path was officially ‘unlocked’ by Dame Seona Reid, Deputy Chair of the Heritage Lottery Fund and Chair of the Scotland Committee. The opening ceremony, ‘Unlocking the Loch,’ involved a key to Loch Leven Castle, believed to be the key which allowed Mary Queen of Scots to make her escape.

Groups of cyclists, runners, walkers and wheelchair-users took part in the ceremony, bringing symbolic keys from communities and organisations around the loch. They included the Kinross Cycling Club, Kinross Road Runners, Ramblers Scotland, Tayside Disabled Group and local schoolchildren.

The ceremony marked the completion of a ten-year project which has involved painstaking negotiations and trail design, to safeguard the largest concentration of breeding ducks in inland Europe as well as tens of thousands of over-wintering geese.

The castle key was lent for the occasion by its owner Keith Adam of Blairadam, a present to his family from Sir Walter Scott.

The Heritage Trail is a safe off-road trail that now runs for a total distance of 21km (13miles) around the shores of Loch Leven and links together over 30 natural and cultural heritage sites. They include the pier which is a focus for sporting heritage, (angling and curling), and Kinross House, one of the finest examples of late 17th century architecture. A ferry service operates from the pier to Lochleven Castle where Mary Queen of Scots was imprisoned.

The final section of the trail, completed at Easter, runs for 6.5km from Kinross Mill to the RSPB Loch Leven nature reserve on the south side of Loch Leven. On its way it provides a new bridge crossing over the Gairney Water and contains a stunning architect-designed viewpoint on a hill overlooking the loch within the RSPB reserve. The trail was created by the charity, TRACKS (The Rural Access Committee of Kinross-shire).

Councillor Willie Robertson, who represents Kinross-shire and is the Chairman of TRACKS, welcomed the guests: “The heritage trail project has brought together communities around the loch and has provided a strategic link with other access networks developed by the local groups. The trail helps to promote healthier lifestyles and is a resource accessible to all. Its popularity has been immense and it has made a significant contribution to the local economy.”

Neil Kilpatrick, the Project Director of the Loch Leven Heritage Trail added: “This new trail section is the final step in completing the route encircling the whole of Loch Leven thus meeting a long standing community objective. We already have over 250,000 visits a year to the existing trail and we expect a significant increase in this figure now that the circuit is complete. The project has only been possible by bringing together willing and helpful landowners around the loch with the statutory resources of Perth and Kinross Council and Scottish Natural Heritage under the umbrella of our funding partners.”

Dame Seona Reid, Deputy Chair of HLF and Chair of the Committee for Scotland, said: “Loch Leven is a fascinating and beautiful area of natural heritage, rich in birdlife and historic gems. The creation of this wonderful trail brings the two together to be enjoyed by people of all ages and abilities. We are delighted to have been part of the project and congratulate all those that have worked and volunteered along its 21km to bring it to such successful completion.”

Martin Auld, RSPB Scotland Regional Director, commented: “It’s great to see the trail now it’s complete and RSPB Scotland is very pleased to be part of it. The new viewpoints on our Loch Leven reserve are a great addition, particularly for people who are unable to make the climb all the way to the top of Vane Hill. I’m sure the trail will help even more people enjoy the wonderful wetland wildlife, fabulous views and peaceful surroundings of the loch.”

Andrew Bachell, SNH Director of Operations, also welcomed the improved access: "It’s wonderful that walkers and cyclists may now enjoy this all-abilities route which provides spectacular views of the loch with its abundant wildlife. I’d like to thank everyone involved for their hard work in getting this route right when working in such a sensitive wildlife site. Loch Leven has an amazing variety of ducks, geese and other wildlife, and the trail will rival that found anywhere in Scotland. I hope to be among the first to enjoy the entire route,” he said.

Andy Keba, Community Links Project Officer for sustainable transport charity, Sustrans Scotland, was pleased to get people off the road, saying: “Sustrans is delighted to have contributed to the completion of this stunning project via our Community Links Fund. Traffic free routes like the Loch Leven Heritage Trail enable people of all ages and abilities to get out and enjoy being active every day. The new path will not only benefit local communities such as Kinross and Milnathort but will attract families from across Scotland looking for a fun and active day out in a beautiful location.”

The Loch Leven Heritage Trail has been the most ambitious project to date by TRACKS. Planning started in 2004 and the project has secured £3million in funding from national and local agencies including the Heritage Lottery Fund, Scottish Natural Heritage, Sustrans, the Gannochy Trust, the Arthur and Margaret Thompson Trust, the Forestry Commission, and Perth and Kinross Council.

The trail construction started in 2006 and the final section is the fifth phase. As most of the trail passes through the Loch Leven National Nature Reserve particular care has been taken to screen the most sensitive wildlife spots by planting trees and hedges in appropriate places. The trail is clearly way-marked and there are maps and information at the four

main access points. Heritage themes have been incorporated into the trail furniture and artworks. Stone features, seats and illustrated panels all have a story to tell, be it about Loch Leven's role in the birth of curling and fishing, or the escape of Mary Queen of Scots.

A Loch Leven Heritage trail leaflet is available from many outlets around Kinross, including the Boathouse Bistro at the Pier, Loch Leven's Larder, RSPB Loch Leven nature reserve and some local shops. A downloadable app for Apple and Android platforms will be available shortly and will provide detailed information on accessing the trail, understanding its many heritage features, and offering wildlife interpretive games for children.

Notes to editors

Loch Leven is the largest loch in lowland Scotland and one of the most important sites for waterfowl in Britain. A National Nature Reserve since 1964, its position, size, shallowness, richness and variety of habitats provide an unique environment that attracts not only the largest concentration of breeding ducks found anywhere in the UK, but many thousands of migratory ducks, geese and swans every autumn and winter. For more information, please visit the Scottish Natural Heritage website.

TRACKS - The Rural Access Committee of Kinross-shire – was established in 1992 to identify and carry out projects that would enhance the local environment. It has now attracted funds in excess of £3.5million to complete a variety of projects including the Heritage Trail, the Kinross to Burleigh footpath, the Crook of Devon to Rumbling Bridge walk, Parenwell Bridge and the Milnathort to Mawcarse cycle track. For more information see the TRACKS website.

Sustrans is the charity behind the National Cycle Network. The network is over 2,000 miles long in Scotland and in 2010 over 40million trips were made on it by people of all ages. The network is made up of various sections of off-road paths, such as the Loch Leven Trail, quiet rural roads and traffic calmed urban streets.

Funding for the final section of the trail has been provided by:

- Scottish Natural Heritage
- The Gannochy Trust
- Sustrans Scotland
- The Arthur and Margaret Thompson Trust
- Heritage Lottery Fund
- The Jean Lindsay Bequest
- Community Challenge Fund
- Tayside Biodiversity Fund

Directions: To reach the Loch Leven Heritage Trail, either leave the M90 at Kinross (Junction 6) and follow signs to Kinross Pier or leave the M90 at Junction 5 south of Kinross and follow the B996 to Loch Leven Mill. Other access points with car parking are at Kirkgate Park in Kinross, Burleigh Sands off the Lethangie minor road, at Findatie and at RSPB Vane farm off the B9097. Scottish Citylink coaches stop at Kinross and local bus routes go close to the loch.

Further information

Please contact Neil Kilpatrick (Project Director) on 01577 850 268 or 07534 661 075, email: neilkil@btinternet.com or George Lawrie (press inquiries) on 01577 862 168 or 07879 883 803, email: gt.lawrie@btconnect.com or Louise Batchelor (tv/radio/online/press) on 07850 742 754, email: louise@louisebatchelor.co.uk.

Photographs of the opening event and the heritage trail are available from Neil Kilpatrick (see above)