

Waiting for an Angel to Pass on the Corrieyairack Pass (odd things can happen if you stray off the beaten track.)



General Wade's Military Road near Melgarve below Corrieyairack Pass

by [Steve Jamnik](#) (January 2022)

The Corrieyairack Pass is situated at the highest part of General Wade's ancient military road which runs from Fort Augustus at the South West tip of Loch Ness, twenty eight

miles across the rugged Monadhliath Mountains, south east to Laggan.

This was one of the roads built by the Anglo-Irish General George Wade in the mid 1700's to help the English armies subdue local Scottish populations and quell the Jacobite Rebellion. The road was constructed in 1731. Because of the rough terrain and the elevation (2,500 feet at its highest) it was the only one of Wade's roads which did not eventually become a modern highway.

In the late seventies I used to tour the Scottish Highlands in a Fiat 850 Motor Caravan. It was a dinky little thing. With the engine at the back, the driver sat at the very front of the vehicle, with no bonnet in the way. The visibility was superb, like sitting at a window sill. My best friend Adrian, very short sighted with astigmatism and a non-driver, but an avid map-reader and traveller, acted as navigator on these trips.

The van was fitted with a Camping Gaz cooker, a plastic sink and two, ten litre plastic water containers. Tea brewed from water taken straight from a rushing mountain burn is the most delicious tea you will ever taste. I imagine it's due to all the dissolved minerals from the peat and the granite. Who knows? Maybe even from the occasional dead sheep.

I had no idea what clean air really smelled like until I awoke one morning high up in the Cairngorms. The air was so sweet and fresh you could drink it. While Adrian rustled up bacon and eggs, I sat on the sheep-cropped turf, and gazed out across what seemed to be a hundred miles, to an emerald green, timeless horizon. Bees buzzed, broom blossom bobbed, bacon sizzled and sheep bleated. Overhead a buzzard circled in the pale blue sky, calling out 'peeeuw.' I wondered if my life might forever be this way.

To the best of my knowledge, as I drove up General Wade's

military road beyond Laggan, guided by the map reading expertise of Adrian, I do not remember seeing a sign that said 'Unsuitable for Road Vehicles' but there might well have been one.

In 1979 the stretch north west from Garvamore was good enough to drive on as far as Melgarve. Beyond that the surface was not tarmacked. At first it was metalled, comprising crushed aggregate and gravel; but further on it became a rough track, consisting of large, flat stones and small rocks, cut across by numerous small ravines and fissures. Hike-able, with stout boots, but unsuitable for road vehicles, and impassable at several points to all but the suicidal.

The road seemed not in the least intimidating for the first few miles. Keeping the van in third gear most of the time, it was easily negotiable. But the further we drove, the worse the condition of the road became. Rutted. Rocky. When we reached the first large fissure, I dropped the van into second gear and jolted it across fairly well. That should have been a warning, but you know what it's like when you've got the bit between your teeth and the wind in your sails. We had come this far. We might as well try to get all the way to Fort Augustus. After all, General Wade had done it.

It was another mile further on that we reached what must have been a ford at one time, because the finer material of the track had been washed away, leaving only rocks. This looked slightly dodgy, so I selected first gear, revved, and drove the van over it.

There was a dull metallic clonk, and the nose of the van dipped sharply. We came to a definite halt. I climbed out and saw to my horror that the front of the van had dropped into a gulch, possibly three feet deep. I climbed back in, put the van into reverse gear and tried to edge it out. No luck. Adrian got out to lighten the load. No luck. I instructed Adrian to push, but he was a frail young man with little

strength in his arms – enough to unfold an Ordnance Survey map, or lift a frying pan, but not much more. Again no go.

I climbed out again. I joined Adrian at the front of the van and we both pushed. We pushed with all the strength we had. I saw the veins stand out on Adrian's temples, and for the first time in all the time I had known him, he began to perspire. But the van stayed stuck. We couldn't budge it.

There are times when one's perception of the world alters. This is at times of stress. As the adrenal glands kick in they flood the bloodstream with adrenaline. This is in preparation for what is succinctly called fight or flight.

Since there was nothing in my immediate vicinity to fight or from which to flee, I experienced the supplementary effects of the activity of my adrenal glands. My vision became pin sharp. Light sensitivity intensified, but colour perception blanched. I became aware of the surface of every square inch of my body. I felt every pore. Every follicle. My mouth became very dry. My scalp appeared to shrink and become too tight for my skull. My hearing became acute. I heard every tuft of heather brushing against every other tuft. I heard my heart beat. My breathing. I could count every eyelash on Adrian's perturbed eyes. I reasoned, there in that barren, craggy, isolated wasteland, that there would be no telephone kiosk or AA Breakdown Patrol man. It was just us, the van and the rocks. No sheep even.

My Auntie Gwen had an odd saying. I remember she said it once at Sunday tea when Uncle David was regaling us with one of his bawdy tales. We heard a quiet thwack under the table, and the tea cups tinkled, as Auntie Gwen's foot lashed out at Uncle David's shin. Then her thin lips compressed even thinner and she said: "I think we should wait for an Angel to pass."

It made for a very awkward moment. Everyone fell silent. Uncle David's face went beetroot red. He'd made a *faux pas* and

didn't know how to get out of it. Now here I was on the Corrieyairack Pass in the middle of my own awkward moment, also having made a *faux pas* and not knowing how to get out of it. Should I have to wait for an Angel to pass as well?

Adrian was as silent as I had ever known him. He didn't even look at his map. The light on the rocks in the distance was a hazy, filmy yellow, rather like a fried egg. I gazed in a stupid, blank way and wondered if my life might forever be this way.

At first I thought it was a deer. It was a humped shape, bobbing slowly up and down beyond some distant rock. It appeared for a few moments, and then sank out of view, before reappearing, bobbing, and then disappearing again. I hoped it was a deer and not something more lethal, like a wolf, but you get like that with ten litres of adrenaline pumping through your veins.

Then the shape parted into two humps, each hump bobbing up and down independently. Whatever it was, it was definitely heading our way. I pointed it out to Adrian, but he can't see anything smaller than the Tower of London, so we decided we should get back in the van and lock the doors, which we did, sitting pitched awkwardly forwards in the seats at an angle of approximately 30 degrees.

Still the creature approached. Then it acquired two bobble hats. And then shoulders. And rucksacks. And Leki walking sticks. Two hikers, and man and his lady companion, clambered over the rocks and clumps of heather, making their way towards us. We peered at them, shame-faced, through the windscreen. Adrian wound down his window.

"You look like you're in a spot of bother," said the man.

It was an English accent. It felt safe to reply.

"I've driven into this ravine. I'm a bit stupid, I'm afraid."

“What are you doing here? This isn’t a proper road.”

I knew I wouldn’t get away with: ‘Oh, I took a wrong turning’ so I simply agreed with him.

“Would you like us to push you out?” said the man. It was one of those astonishing things people say from time to time; things like: “Oh I have an old one of those, I never use it. Would you like it?” Or: “I think I know someone who can help with that. I have his phone number. Just call and mention my name.”

Adrian climbed out and joined Hiker Man and Hiker Lady. I put the van into reverse, revved and as I slowly let out the clutch the three pushers pushed. The van rose smoothly out of the gulch. When it was clear I pulled the handbrake on so firmly I nearly snapped the cable. I switched off the engine and climbed out.

“I just want to say thank you. Thank you very much. You saved us.”

Hiker Man grinned and I saw him glance at Hiker Lady. They must have been using some secret code because she never said anything. She just smiled and then Hiker Man and Hiker Lady turned on their heels and headed north east, and I watched them bobbing gently up and down until their bobble hats disappeared behind the rocks.

The air had grown chill. I got back into the van. Adrian stood guard while I executed a forty-three point turn. He climbed in and, in second gear nearly all the way, we returned to Melgarve, and thence the main road and back to civilisation.

As the sun began to set, I realised that this Angel-passing business wasn’t so odd after all; but also something else: an important detail. Angels don’t pass singly. Angels pass in pairs. And I can prove it.

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