

Walk 1: Cowie - Highland Fault - Skatie Shore Loop

Distance: 5 km / 3.1 miles - allow 90 minutes

Difficulty: Moderate (rough, narrow paths with one or two steep sections)



For your safety: -

> the walk takes us along rough, uneven paths and slippery shores, so please wear suitable footwear

> part of the walk is close to some steep cliff edges, so care must be taken

> part of the walk takes us to the edge of Stonehaven Golf Course, so please be alert to golfers and listen for shouts of "Fore"

On this walk we are going to explore the dramatic coastline immediately north of Stonehaven and learn a few remarkable secrets along the way.

The area we are covering has one of the richest coastal floras in Aberdeenshire, so as well as taking in the dramatic scenery, watch out for wildflowers and the creatures that live amongst them whilst you walk.

Features on the walk are best seen at low tide, so please check tide times in advance. Whilst checking tides on that page, check the weather too – the walk is best enjoyed when it's not wet and windy.

Starting Point

Our starting point is the sign post behind Stonehaven Open Air Pool. Follow the direction of the Highland Fault sign which takes us towards the village of Cowie. As you approach the COWIE sign-post, you can either stay right of the houses and walk along the raised beach or follow the main road through Cowie – both routes will take you on to Boatie Row.

Note – In the event that the footpath beyond Cowie is unusable, or if this route is too challenging, return to the sign post and follow the pavement leading to the main road entering Stonehaven. Turn right at the junction and follow the pavement up to the golf course. Once the golf course is reached it is possible to head down to the Chapel of St.Mary as described later.

If you wish to just visit the Skatie Shore beach, once you reach the golf course entrance, head left under the rail bridge and follow pavement on right hand side which leads you to the path down through Den of Cowie.



Life on earth began in Stonehaven

Keep walking along the road, staying close to the shore and you'll shortly come to a wooden fence with an information board explaining how life on earth began in Stonehaven. Okay, I'm exaggerating slightly, but the world of paleontology was abuzz for a while, when in 2003 a fragment of a fossil millipede was found and confirmed by Yale University to be 428 million years of age, making it the world's oldest known air-breathing creature ever discovered.

Unfortunately, the dating technique used in 2003 was prone to significant error and in 2017 a more accurate dating technique (radiometric dating of zircons in the sediments above and below the fossil) showed the fossil

actually dated back to just 414 million years ago. Still, that's a lot of candles on a birthday cake and to this day the fossil remains one of Scotland's most important paleontological finds.

Playfully, the information board plinth contains a time capsule, containing all manner of treasures for future archaeologists, anthropologists, or historians to make sense of : a 2006 United Kingdom Uncirculated Coin Collection, eight photographs of local buildings of historical interest, a list of the Fossil Group Members, a Message of Goodwill from the Fossil Group Members, an A4 photograph of Stonehaven Harbour, a newspaper report on the time capsule, a 'Stonehaven it's Special' brochure, a 70 Years at Stonehaven Open Air Pool booklet, a Dunnottar Woodland Park leaflet and a *pneumodesmus newmani* fossil information leaflet. Brilliant!

If you're on the right path, it'll be an uphill one

At the end of the fence, you'll find a rough path at the foot of the cliff. As you follow it, know that below your feet is a band of rock from from than 400 million years ago, formed during a time when Stonehaven was actually located South of the equator. This rock is made up of layers of sand, silt and mud that was carried and deposited by rivers, which over time was preserved as sedimentary rock. It's in this sedimentary rock that we find fossils such as our millipede.

Scotland used to lie south of the equator in an ancient continent called Laurentia but over hundreds of millions of years drifted north, chased by the continent of Avalonia (to which England and Wales belonged), eventually colliding to create the Caledonian Mountain belt which may have been comparable in size at the time to the Himalayas.

The collision of these ancient continents caused these sedimentary rocks to tilt and buckle, so instead of lying horizontally, these rocks now lie almost at a right angle to the horizontal.

Sedimentary rocks here are almost in a vertical plane. Can you spot the heron? Note also the wave-cut platform here. Sea waves have undercut the foundations of the near vertical cliff face, causing their collapse. Fallen debris is then removed by the sea and the process repeats, forming this rocky platform.



Cowie Castle and Clan Fraser

Continuing along the path you will reach some hawthorn trees, which mark the site of Cowie Castle on your right. "I see no castle" I hear you say. You're quite correct. The stone from the walls of the building were quite possibly taken for use elsewhere, leaving just the foundations of Cowie Castle, hidden under grass, almost completely invisible.

It's worth mentioning that this was the stronghold home of one of Scotland's most ancient and famous families, the powerful Fraser family – famous warriors in the days of Robert the Bruce, Thanes of Cowie/ Collie and ancestors to (the fictional character) Jamie Fraser from the hugely successful Outlander TV series.

Cowie and its Castle probably provided occasional lodging to the Kings of Scotland and high officers of the king's court. Like other places which came under the protection of the Thanes Castle, the Royal Burgh of Cowie prospered with the fortunes of its owner and decayed along with them. Sadly, after 1645 and the Jacobite Rebellion, the Castle fell into decline.



The Chapel of St. Mary & St Nathalan and Its Kirkyard

Enter the kirkyard by the black gate and walk through it, keeping right.

Also known as Chapel of Our Lady of the Storms or Cowie Chapel, this place existed as a church over nearly three centuries and was frequently visited by Scottish monarchy including King James IV.

Alas it fell into disrepute and was suppressed as a place of worship soon after the Reformation in 1560 and before 1567. Thereafter, its stone and roof were used as a resource.

A story goes that William Rait of nearby Redcloak Farm took part of the roof to build his house and was then punished for this sacrilege by the whole house raining drops of blood. This phenomenon was possibly caused by a vein of iron in the salvaged stone.

Leaving by the north easterly gate, we should now follow the path along

the top of the cliff that skirts the golf course.

Stonehaven Golf Club



Stonehaven Golf Club welcomes visitors to play the course and also experience 'The View' Restaurant in the clubhouse. Founded on April 13th 1888, the course was planned by Archibald Simpson and was originally a nine hole course, but over time was enlarged to a full-sized 18-hole course.

We are going to keep to the path by the cliff edge. To reduce the risk of being hit by a wayward golf ball, please be alert to golfers and ensure that active play is ahead of you and not behind you.

When you arrive at Ruthery head/ the 2nd tee, look back and you will maybe better see the wave-cut platform and old red sandstone cliffs.



Now look to the North across Craigeven Bay. If looking at this view at low tide, you may notice different colours in the rocks of the bay and sea stacks that form a visible line across the bay. This marks the Highland Boundary Fault – a linear feature separating two different ages and types of rock.

Let's now skirt along the edge of the golf course to the headland at the other side of Craigeven Bay.



The Highland Boundary Fault

The Highland Boundary Fault is a great fracture in the Earth's crust – a dividing line between the Highlands and the Midland Valley of Scotland. This ruler-straight line runs across Scotland from Stonehaven to the Isle of Bute, approximately 180 miles south-west of here.

On the northern side of the line, we have Dalradian rocks that are roughly 500-600 million years old. On the southern side of the line, we have Devonian, Carboniferous and Permian rocks which are roughly 420-250 million years old. Sandwiched in the middle, we have an exotic group of rocks known as the Highland Border Complex which are roughly 470 million years old. It's a geologist's paradise.

Look back across Craigeven Bay again, we get a different and perhaps more visible view of The Highland Boundary fault line. Now let's continue along the cliffs to Garron Point.



Garron Point

As the path gradually drops down to sea level, we find ourselves walking on the highland boundary fault itself, which disappears into the North Sea. As we go, you'll notice a big variation in the colours and textures of the rocks.

Skatie Shore

Continuing along the coastline, the view suddenly opens up and you'll find yourself on a small, sandy and secluded beach. Here, you can gather your thoughts whilst watching the waves crash against the unique rock formations that protrude from the beach and sea. When the weather's good this place is like a piece of heaven.



It's just beyond the concrete anti-tank blocks (relics from World War 2) that we want to take a left and follow an uphill path. Walk under the railway viaduct which was opened in 1850 by the Aberdeen Railway, then across the path and down into a wooded area called Den of Cowie.



Den of Cowie

There are few woodland areas along the Aberdeenshire coastline and those that exist are relatively small and in sheltered areas. The Den of Cowie is the largest and most significant woodland area on the Aberdeenshire coastline.

Traverse through these woods and you'll find yourself on a road, which we'll follow down into Stonehaven. Please note that cars use this road too, so whilst walking down the road, where there is no pavement, please keep to the right-hand side so that you can see oncoming traffic.



The Ancient Burgh of Cowie

Walking down the road, it's worth mentioning that on the lands to your right, The Ancient Burgh of Cowie existed from 1367 and stood for nearly 300 years. This place was of far greater importance than Stonehaven and enjoyed charter rights, which gave it privileges such as trade without paying toll/ tax.

Towards the end of the 13th century, it was owned by Sir Alexander Fraser, a friend of Robert the Bruce and grew from a crofting community to include a brewery, brick kiln, weavers shop, smithy and a hostelry.

It flourished until 1645, when the Marquis of Montrose burnt it to the ground. The Cowie name now only persists in the village of Cowie, further down the road where we started our walk.

Walking through Cowie

As Stonehaven comes into view again, you'll find at the end of a road barrier a path with steps going down into Cowie. Take this path and head seaward, going past the Art Deco/ Streamline Modern house on your right and the terraced houses with their beautiful gardens on your left.

Turn right onto Helen Row and you're on the home straight and will shortly arrive back at our starting point.

