

# Castle Semple, Lochwinnoch

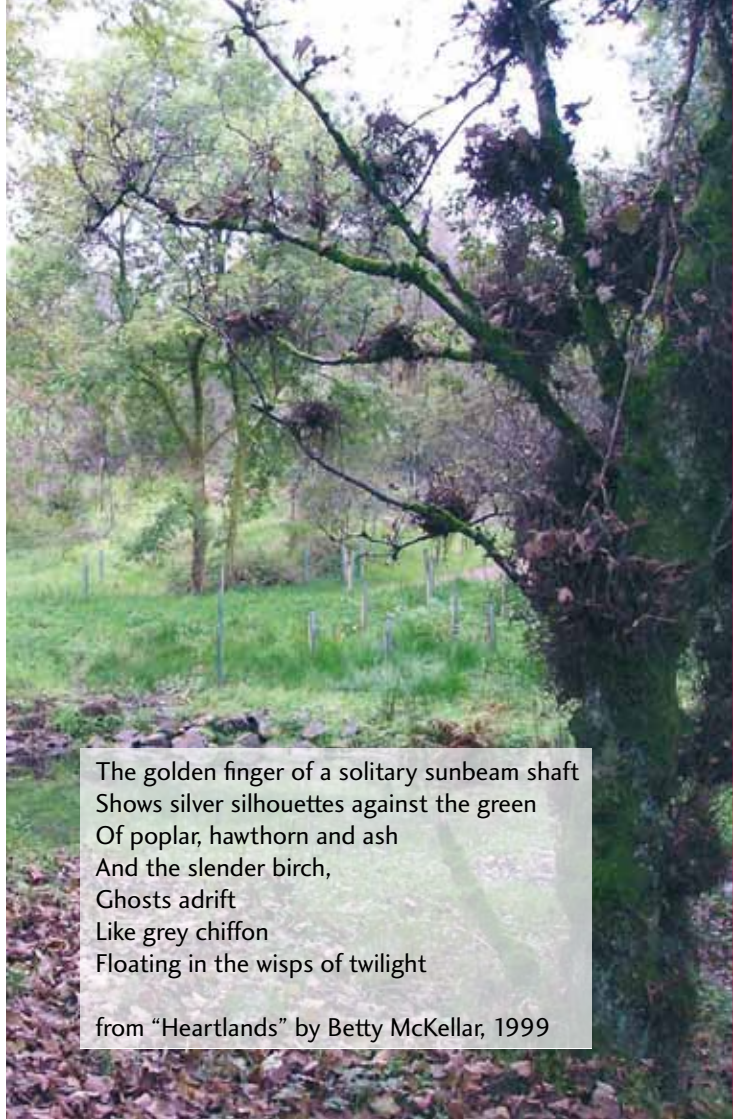
Mature woodlands, distant views to the Firth of Clyde, a medieval church, the traces of an old formal estate, and a loch shore – this route certainly has plenty of variety. In Parkhill Wood you'll see lots of changes with the passage of the seasons. Bluebells in spring, bright summer flowers, the rich reds and russets of autumn foliage, and bright winter berries attracting feeding birds. Enjoy it at any time of year !

**Start and finish** Castle Semple Visitor Centre, about 500m from the centre of Lochwinnoch (grid reference NS358590). There are signposts to the Centre in the village, which you can reach by public transport.

**Distance** 8 km (5 miles). Allow 3 hours.

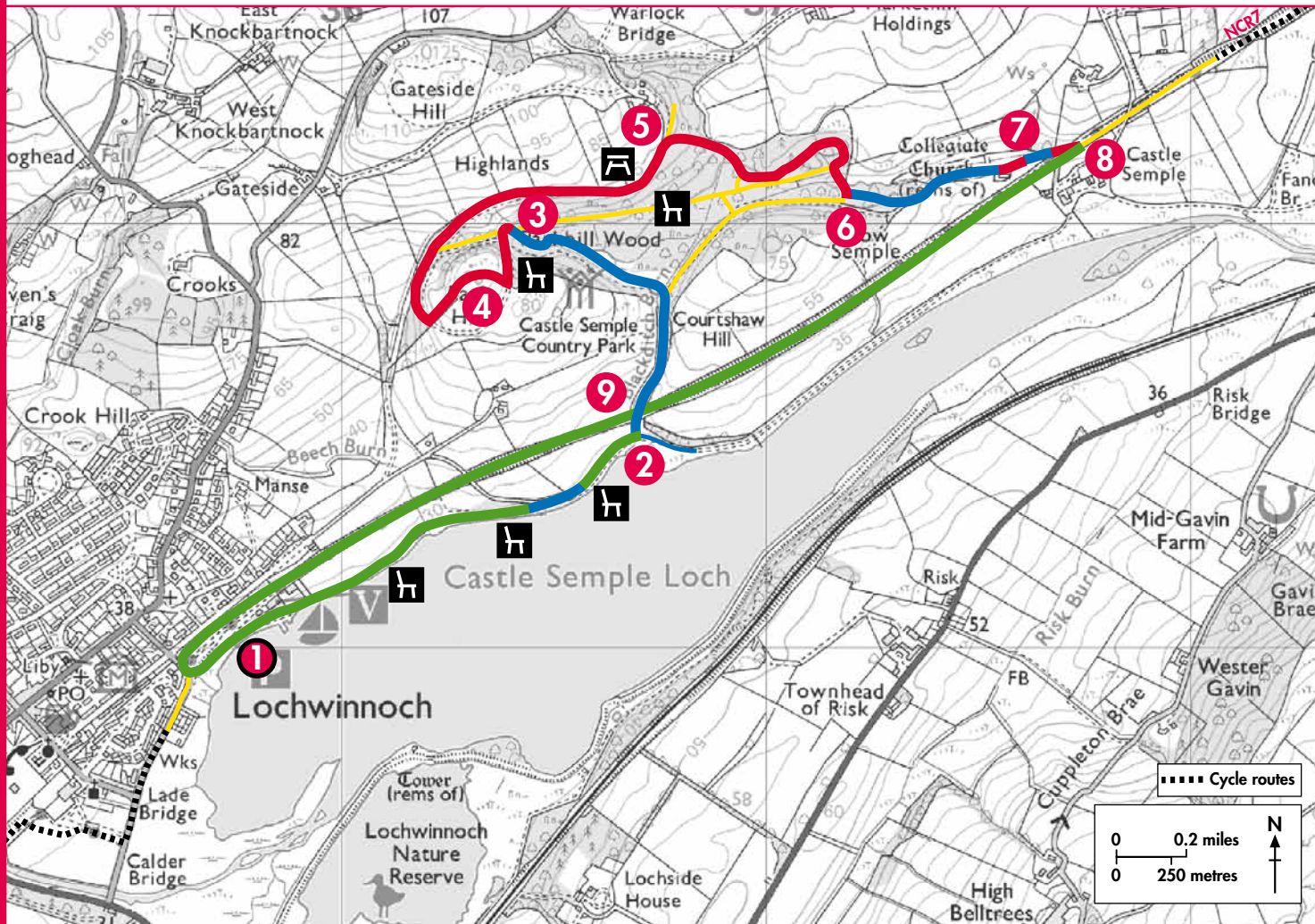
**Terrain** Mixture of excellent flat paths and narrower woodland paths. Some muddy sections. No stiles but some gates.

Parkhill Wood



The golden finger of a solitary sunbeam shaft  
Shows silver silhouettes against the green  
Of poplar, hawthorn and ash  
And the slender birch,  
Ghosts adrift  
Like grey chiffon  
Floating in the wisps of twilight

from "Heartlands" by Betty McKellar, 1999





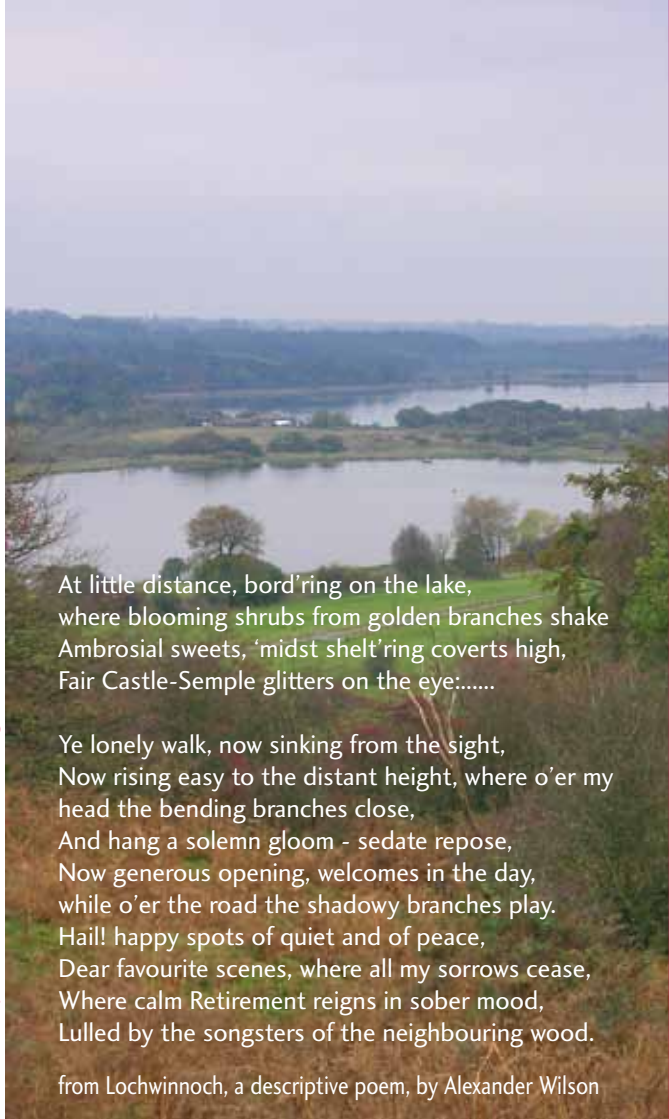
**1** From Castle Semple Visitor Centre car park, walk along the shore of Castle Semple Loch in front of the Centre building. Continue along the shore path. There are plenty of seats along here.

**2** At a path junction with a lifebuoy and signboard, turn left up the hill. Cross the cycle track carefully. Go through the narrow kissing gate and follow the path into Parkhill Wood. At the first junction (after 200m), turn left over a footbridge onto a smaller path. After about 500m this leads to a pond and grotto with a couple of seats.

**Castle Semple** The whole of Parkhill Wood, used to be part of a large formal estate founded many centuries ago by the Sempill or Semple family. They had close links with the Scottish crown, and were rewarded for their loyalty by being made lords by James IV in the late 1400s. The original Castle Semple was built around 1500. The Semple family sold the grounds in 1727 to the wealthy Macdowall family, who demolished the old castle and replaced it with an elegant new mansion – Castle Semple House. During the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, they added many features such as the grotto and ornate gatehouses. Most of the House was demolished in 1950 after a fire, but you can still see traces of the estate's former glory on this walk. The grotto is currently being restored by the Semple Family Society.

**3** Just beyond the grotto, turn left at a T junction. You are now on an old carriage drive that used to run between Castle Semple

Castle Semple Loch, with Barr Loch in background



At little distance, bord'ring on the lake,  
where blooming shrubs from golden branches shake  
Ambrosial sweets, 'midst shelt'ring coverts high,  
Fair Castle-Semple glitters on the eye:.....

Ye lonely walk, now sinking from the sight,  
Now rising easy to the distant height, where o'er my  
head the bending branches close,  
And hang a solemn gloom - sedate repose,  
Now generous opening, welcomes in the day,  
while o'er the road the shadowy branches play.  
Hail! happy spots of quiet and of peace,  
Dear favourite scenes, where all my sorrows cease,  
Where calm Retirement reigns in sober mood,  
Lulled by the songsters of the neighbouring wood.

from Lochwinnoch, a descriptive poem, by Alexander Wilson



The grotto



Collegiate Church

House and Lochwinnoch. After a few metres, fork left at another junction. The grotto is down to your left. Follow the path uphill, out of the trees, and up a short steep slope to the top of Park Hill.

**Park Hill** There is a magnificent view of three lochs. The nearest is Castle Semple Loch, which looks as if it is in two parts but is in fact all one loch. Just beyond it is Barr Loch. The two are now separated by the Glasgow to Largs road, but used to be joined together. Further away, to the right of Beith's characteristic church tower on the skyline, is a glimpse of Kilbirnie Loch. If you're lucky you might see Ailsa Craig, 70km away in the Firth of Clyde. Further right again and much closer at hand, the prominent hill is Misty Law.

**4** From the top of Park Hill, continue along the path, dropping down the hill towards the lochs. Keep on the path where it turns sharp right away from the fence, and follow it back into the

woodland for 100m or so to a junction. Keep left along the path, which climbs gradually along the edge of the wood. You can see across the valley to the hills above Howwood.

**5** Just after a seat, follow the right fork of the path down the hill. Go over a footbridge to a T junction. Turn left along a narrower path, which threads through the rhododendrons and around "Downies Castle", a little hill covered in ancient yew trees. After about 500m, the path leads over a stone footbridge: ignore the path to the right and go up to the T junction.

**6** Turn left along the main track. Go through a wooden kissing gate on the edge of the wood, and carry straight on along the farm track. (There are old fish ponds and an ice house in the trees to your left, part of the old estate grounds.)

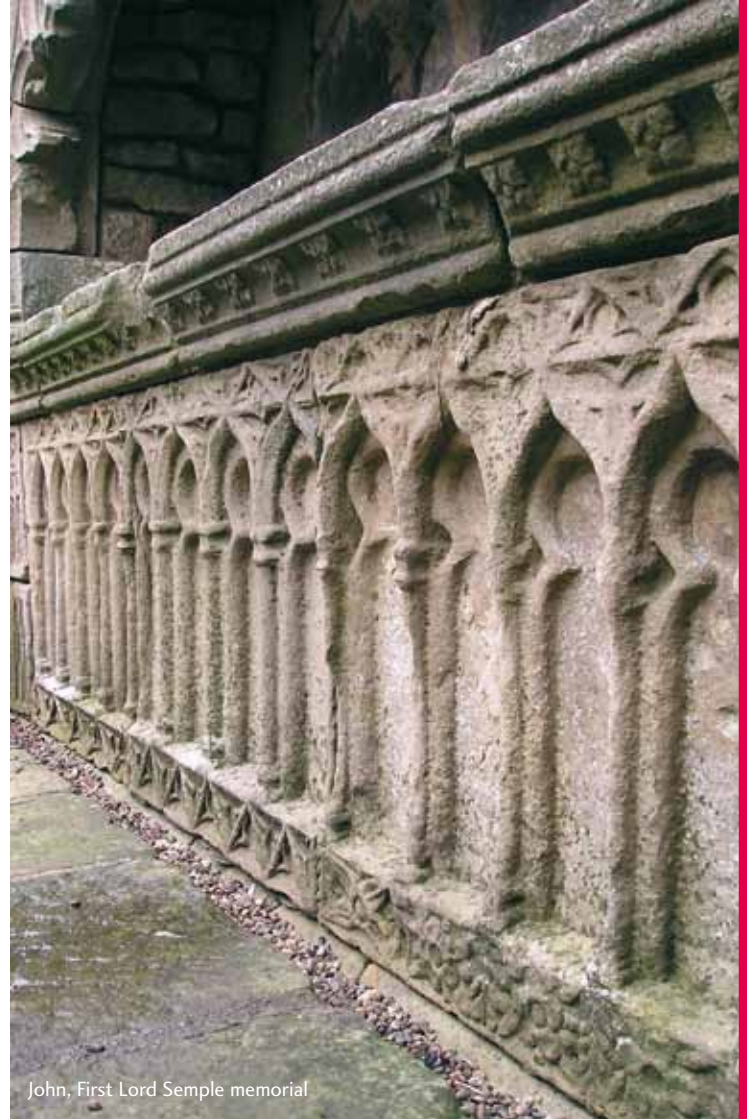
**7** The Collegiate Church is soon obvious on the right hand side of the

farm track. You can access it through a metal kissing gate. Although it is a ruin, it is open to the public and is safe to enter. The door is on the far side. There is an interpretation panel inside. From the Church, continue along the farm track. Turn right through a smaller gate, just before the ornate railway bridge. Go up the tarmac ramp to the cycle track.

**Collegiate Church** The Church was founded as a place for worship and learning in 1504, about the same time as Castle Semple. The Church was endowed for a Provost, six Chaplains, a Sacrist and two singing boys. Inside the Church, you can see the ornate tomb of the Church's founder, John, First Lord Sempill. The Church remained in use until the 1680s.

**8** To see what remains of Castle Semple House, turn left along the cycle track to the bridge parapet: the house with arched windows is the back of the old east wing, with a fine view across the loch. The houses here are privately owned. Please respect the residents' privacy. To return to the Centre car park, go back on the cycle track in the other direction, past the Collegiate Church. Listen out for cyclists!

**9** After 1.5 km (about halfway back) you reach the point where you crossed the cycle track earlier, at the



John, First Lord Semple memorial





Inside the Collegiate Church

entrance to Parkhill Wood. You can either carry on along the cycle track or go back on the lochside path (the way you came earlier). Both are the same distance. If you continue along the cycle track, you will see the Centre on your left. Continue about 150 metres further and fork left down the easy ramp to the car park entrance.

## Getting to the start

**Rail** Lochwinnoch station is 1.5 km from the start. Hourly service from Glasgow, Paisley, Johnstone and Ayrshire. You'll then need to catch a bus (no.307) or walk (turn left out of station and follow signs to Castle Semple Visitor Centre).

**Bus** Gillens/Key (no.307) between Lochwinnoch village centre and Johnstone; nearest bus stop 500 m.

**Bicycle** The Sustrans cycle track Glasgow, Paisley, and Johnstone to Irvine runs right past the Castle Semple Visitor Centre. Bring a lock for your bike.

**Car** Lochwinnoch lies just off the A760 approximately halfway between Glasgow and Largs. As you approach Lochwinnoch from the Glasgow direction, there are signs to Castle Semple Visitor Centre. Follow signposts in Lochwinnoch to Castle Semple Visitor Centre. Car park can get busy at weekends.

**Please check rail and bus times with Traveline Scotland before travelling. Tel: 0870 608 2 608 [www.travelinescotland.com](http://www.travelinescotland.com)**

## Refreshments

**Brown Bull Pub and Restaurant** 33 Main Street.  
Tel: 01505 843250

**Castle Semple Centre Café** See Further Information.

**La Dolce Vita Takeaway** 9-13 High Street. Tel: 01505 843372

**Garthland Arms Bar and Restaurant** 5 Church Street.  
Tel: 01505 842047

**The Hungry Monk Restaurant and bar.** 1 mile along A760 towards Paisley, near rail station. Tel:01505 842357

**Cucina Minucci at the Junction Café.** 2-4 High Street. Tel: 01505 842225 Tel: 01505 843848

**RSPB Reserve** Hot drinks and snacks. See Further Information.

## Further information

**Castle Semple Visitor Centre** Open daily. Shop, café, toilets, ranger service, leaflets for other walks, watersports, bike hire, archery, fishing permits, exhibitions, events. Tel: 01505 842882  
[www.clydemuirshiel.co.uk](http://www.clydemuirshiel.co.uk)

**[www.lochwinnoch.info](http://www.lochwinnoch.info)** Contains lots of information about local history, where to go, what's on, and local clubs and businesses. Links to many other local websites.

**RSPB Lochwinnoch Reserve** Open daily. Visitor centre, shop, café, toilets, bird hide (fee) and nature trails (fee). Opposite rail station, 1 mile from start of route on A760 towards Paisley. Tel: 01505 842663

**Lochwinnoch Community Library** Limited opening hours. Historical photos and information. High Street. Tel: 01505 842305.

**Semple Family Society** Information about the Semple family and restoration of the grotto. [www.semple.org](http://www.semple.org)



Sunset over Muirshiel