

Fifty years ago a road bridge across the River Garry in Perthshire was declared open. It offered a route from the A9 across the wilds of Rannoch Moor to the west, and was considered a minor engineering triumph — the first box girder bridge in the area, standing 40m above the river, built with pre-war machinery and a lot of back-breaking labour. Last weekend some of the men who worked on it came back to take part in a 50th anniversary celebration, and to marvel at what they had done. “It was hard work, we had to hand-drill for nine to ten hours a day — it would never be allowed today,” one of them, Bill Stewart, said. “But we’re proud of what we did.”

What they did not envisage then was that the bridge, which opened up access to the western Highlands, would become a tourist attraction, not just because of its stunning views across Loch Tummel, but because it has become the place you have to visit if you want to canoe, white-water raft or go bungee jumping. People queue up to leap from the parapet; couples celebrate their wedding by plunging towards the waters beneath. It features high on bucket lists across the country. Around it a small but thriving tourist industry has grown up.

We gathered for the bridge’s birthday in the visitors’ centre at Killiecrankie, site of one of Scotland’s most famous battles, where in 1689 Jacobite clansmen under Bonnie Dundee stormed down from the heights above the Garry and crushed a government army waiting for them beneath. The river, it is said, ran red with the blood of Lowland soldiers. It is arguably, after Bannockburn and Culloden, the most important battle site in Scotland.

Here, too, they are planning a road. This time, however, far from creating a local industry, the outcome would obliterate it. The A9 dual carriageway will run through the most sensitive part of the Killiecrankie battlefield where the two armies clashed and fought.

Everyone I spoke to on Saturday was against it but pretty well everyone thinks it will happen anyway. Despite objections lodged at various stages by the National Trust for Scotland, Historic Environment Scotland (HES), the Cairngorms National Park Authority, Perth and Kinross council, a formidable local protest group, MSPs and even the deputy first minister, John Swinney, the road seems likely to win. An archaeological survey has uncovered bullets, horseshoes, muskets and armour but none of this has stopped the plan. Alternative routes have been rejected.

This is because of Scotland’s strange planning laws which ensure that transport authorities have precedence over pretty well every other statutory body. The A9 dualling project is governed by the Roads (Scotland) Act of 1984 which gives the transport secretary overriding powers to “reconstruct, alter, widen, improve or renew any [trunk] road or to determine the means by which the public right of passage over it, or over any part of it, may be exercised”.

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Designed to ensure that road links across Scotland are given priority, it means Transport Scotland holds all the cards when it comes to planning inquiries. Even HES, which should by rights have the ultimate say over preserving sites of historic importance, has been reduced to presenting advice and comment only and now appears to have withdrawn any objections it might once have had. Unable to overturn the scheme, it fell back on a series of “refinements” to the design and has now stepped back from opposing it.

Its statement is a classic fudge: “Having assessed the refined designs in light of the new information the archaeological work has produced, we have concluded that although the impact of the proposal remains significant, they no longer raise historic environment issues in the national interest such that they warrant an objection from HES.”

When the full inquiry opens in January, Transport Scotland will be able to argue that it has accepted the HES refinements, reduced the overall area and listened to the “sensitivities” of local protesters. As a result it will claim that the final route, the lay-bys, embankments, slip-roads and altered landscape will have limited impact on the site.

That, say the objectors, is simply not true. The new A9 will still run directly through key areas of the battlefield. A 57-page report by local campaigners argues that changes made to the scheme by Transport Scotland have only been introduced to persuade HES to withdraw its objections, and that the new road will run directly down the line where the two opposing armies fought.

Some time next year the inquiry's reporter, having listened to both sides, will present ministers with a recommendation. Already, however, the view is growing that Transport Scotland will win the argument because of the overriding priorities set down in the act. The decision will then rest with ministers, specifically the cabinet secretary, Michael Matheson. Will he have the courage to come down on the side of history? Don't hold your breath.

It is, of course, an age-old confrontation between tradition and progress. But this is about more than just a battlefield. It is about a local community, a thriving tourist industry and the links with our past. All three are bound up together. Bury Killiecrankie and the bodies of fallen soldiers beneath the Tarmac and you bury not only our history but those who preserve it, bring it to life, and pass it on to the next generation