

# Last Travels in Scotland

With retirements impending, and grandchildren growing, we are looking to begin splitting our time between Scotland and Indiana, beginning this autumn. So we took advantage of the summer of 2023 to do as much travelling as we could, since our location in Caithness, Scotland serves as a great jumping-off point for some great explorations.



Scotland



Gotland



Sweden



Estonia



Latvia



Poland



Germany



Denmark



Finland

In what locals refer to as “The Kingdom of Fife”, in the middle of Scotland, I visited quaint little Dysart Harbour, which has an extensive sea wall, with a tower guarding its entrance. Low tide can leave the local boats high-and-dry, so stilts are employed to keep them upright.



Overlooking the harbor is the six story St. Serf’s Tower (below left), a unique battlemented church tower, which dates from around 1245. It is the only remaining part of St. Serv’s Church, and served as a lookout tower in both of the world wars. St. Serf was a Scottish saint who lived in the 6<sup>th</sup> century and is venerated in western Fife.



The tower on the right is Scotstarvit Tower, which overlooks the River Eden. Fife is a home to a number of

ancient towers, and I had the opportunity to explore this one. Scotstarvit is a rather stark tower that was first built in 1487 as part of a family estate, but by 1612, it had been turned into a college for men of learning. As I said, I had the freedom to explore it a bit, climbing to all levels except the battlements, using a single narrow flight of spiral stairs.



The ground floor is a stone vault that gave the building a solid base. This was used primarily as a storehouse.



Above that was another storeroom, but this one with a wooden ceiling.



The next higher floor was the grand hall, which also was built as a stone vault with an impressive arched ceiling.



The two floors above that featured wooden ceilings and were probably used as bedchambers or dormitory space.



Some impressive carved stones had been moved to the inside for preservation. The one on the right carries the words "A wight (brave in archaic English) man never wanted a weapon".



I also visited the ruins of Dunfermline Abbey and the modern Dunfermline Abbey Church next to the ruins.



Queen Margaret, a Hungarian, who became wife of King Malcolm of Scotland, was known for her piety and charity. She invited monks from Canterbury to start a priory here in 1070. It grew to a full-fledged abbey and, after her death, it became the place of her burial, and a site of pilgrimage after she was canonized by the Pope as Scotland's only royal saint. The impressive modern church on the site remains dedicated to her memory.



I also stopped to examine the ruins of Ravenscraig Castle. It was built under the leadership of Queen Mary of Scotland, wife of James II after he died and she became the de facto leader of Scotland until her son, James III came of age.



Then followed a weekend at Knockhill, where a wide variety of sports cars, old and new, fast and slow, were in action.



In 7 years living in Scotland and 12 years of visiting here, we had never truly explored Loch Lomond, one of Scotland’s best-known sites. So, on another trip, we took a cruise and gazed upon its “bonnie, bonnie banks” as the famous song goes.



Living in the land of single malt whisky, I have developed quite a taste for the sweeter variety, frequently finished in sherry casks. So, when a new distillery was opened at John O’Groats, near our home in Caithness (making it the most northern distillery on the island of Great Britain), I invested in a cask. After delays of the opening due to covid, my cask was finally ready for filling, and on the big day, I attended and got to fill my own cask.



It will now wait along-side many others for 5-8 years, with myself and the owners sampling it every year to determine when I am ready to bottle. Having had a chance to take a wee taste of the raw spirit, and a sniff of the cask (lovely

and sweet from having been filled with Pedro Ximenez sherry) I have high hopes for the final product.



On another outing to the middle of Scotland, I stopped in at Glamis Castle (pronounced locally as Glams).



No – the above is not the castle. That’s just a decorative turret. Below is the castle.



From there it was on to Brechin Round Tower – one of only two such towers in Scotland – whereas there are remnants of over 100 in Ireland. The tower stands beside the church

and is believed to have once been the bell tower, as well as safe storage for religious relics.



The narrow entrance doorway could be easily defended and is additionally guarded by carvings of Jesus (above) two saints (each side) and crouching lions (at the base). From there I went to look at the Aberlermo Standing Stones, which are some of the best preserved Pictish stones in existence. The Roadside Cross Stone has stood in its socket for roughly 1200 years. One side bears the Celtic Cross, representing the conversion of the Picts to Christianity. The other side shows images of hunting, a shepherd protecting his flock, and a centaur gathering medicinal herbs.



The next two pictures are of the Crescent Stone, depicting a faint image of the crescent moon, and the Serpent Stone, with the image of a snake. These are believed to be older, from about 1500 years ago.

And finally, there is the Churchyard Cross Stone, so named, because of its location in an 18<sup>th</sup> century churchyard, indicating that the use of the site had been of religious significance through centuries of time. It dates from the time of conversion of the Picts, so perhaps 1200 years ago, and has a highly decorative Celtic Cross on one side and scenes of a battle on the opposite side.



From there I went on to Knockhill again, for the Touring Car races – where the cars really fly – literally.



We took our vintage MG for its annual outing to the weekend vintage vehicle show on the main Orkney island. This two-day event usually pulls in 500-600 vintage cars, motorbikes, tractors and stationary displays.



While in Orkney, we stopped by the incredibly large Gurness Broch neolithic site, which must have housed hundreds of people.



And on that same trip to the islands, I visited an early 1800s Click Mill, which is still intact.



The water flows in, horizontally, on the opposite side of the building, at floor level, and falls through a vertical wheel (next photo), which is turned by the inertia of the flowing water, which then exits the building via the large opening on the right in the photo above.



Inside there is a lever (next photo) which can be used to open the inlet for the water, allowing it to flow to the water wheel.



The turning wheel, below the floor, is attached to the following mechanism inside. Grain is fed into the hopper at the top, and it funnels down to the grinding wheels, where it is pulverized into flour, which then slides out the little shoot and falls into the wooden tub at the bottom, from whence it could be scooped up into bags for sale.

Although interesting as an engineering feat of the time, it is perhaps more noteworthy as a demonstration of how remote the north of Scotland is. If you follow a few wee signs down a series of one-track roads, you come to a tiny parking spot and a sign that directs you back through some farmer's fields, and over a hill, to a stream, where the mill sits. The door has a key in it, and you can let yourself inside to see all the operating equipment. Lock the door when you leave, please.



The next photo is Tynemouth Priory and Castle, which sits at the mouth of the Tyne River, from whence we began our cruise exploring the countries bordering the Baltic Sea.



If you only have interest in our Scottish travels, you can stop reading now. But we also spent time this summer exploring the countries of the Baltic. I could flood you with pictures, but there were so many countries, that I feel I need to limit to only a few of the most interesting from each city.

Tallinn, the capital of Estonia has a wonderful old town. As I discovered a few years ago when I visited Bratislava, Slovakia, the old towns of some of the eastern European counties hide the fact that they were once behind the Iron

Curtain and part of the Soviet Block. While newer portions, built by the Soviets, are stark and ominous, the old towns have survived as wonderfully imaginative and colorful. And now that the countries are once again free, they have become lively centers of activity again. The following photos are of Tallinn's Russian Orthodox Cathedral, and one of the 26 towers that still remain as part of the medieval wall that once surrounded the city.



Riga, Latvia was once a walled city as well. But the entire wall is gone, and the moat that accompanied the wall has been turned into a lovely canal.



Latvians (as well as their Estonian and Lithuanian neighbors) are extremely proud of their support of the people of Ukraine. These may be tiny countries, but they have taken in huge numbers of Ukrainian refugees and sent millions of Euros in support. A flower bouquet of the Ukraine flag currently rests at the bottom of their Monument to Freedom, which has a constant marching of the guard. The symbology here is that one must be ever vigilant of freedom. These tiny countries, with extensive borders with Russia, realize that they could be next if Russia subdues Ukraine. And they remember all too well the poor quality of life that existed under Soviet rule. We in the west do not have a true appreciation for the peril that they feel.



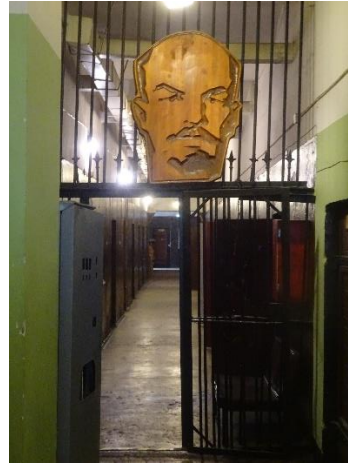
Also of interest, in Riga, was when Wendy got to meet the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come. Actually, it is one of a series of statues dedicated to the monks that used to reside there.



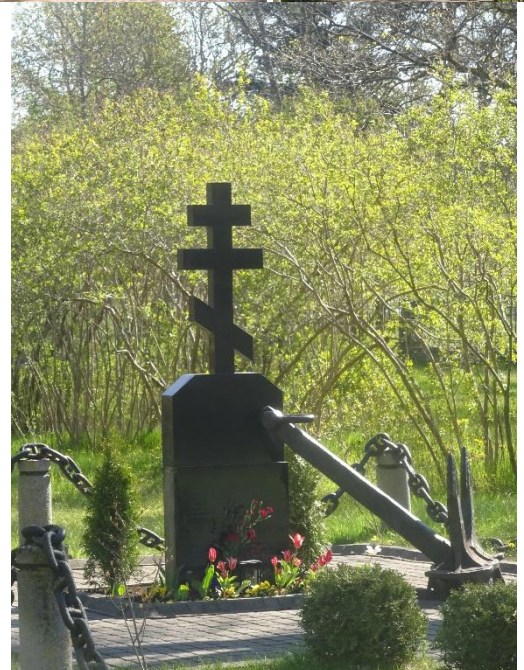
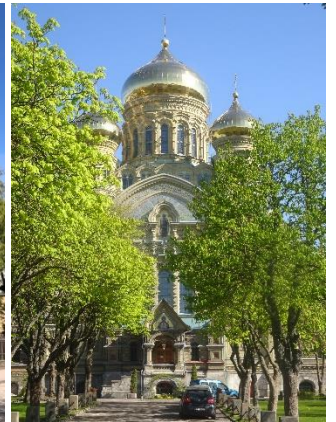
Liepaja, Latvia gave us a stark understanding of what the Soviet era was like, as we were bussed past many of the structures built in that time. Stark and foreboding, they were a huge contrast to the surviving (and now again thriving) colorful old towns which represent the true culture of these tiny countries.



We had a chilling opportunity to visit a former Soviet prison, today preserved as a museum. After this trip we had quite a perspective on life in Soviet-controlled eastern Europe.



But we also learned a great deal about both the Lutheran (pointy spired) churches and the Orthodox (rounded spired) churches. And the meaning of the Russian Orthodox cross.



The Orthodox cross has three crossbars. The center, largest one represents the beam to which Christ's

hands were nailed, same as we see in western crosses. The top bar represents the board that carried the name provided in John's Gospel, and the lower, slanted bar represents the footrest, which was used to relieve some of the weight of the body and thus prolong the torture.

Our next Baltic stop was Gdansk, Poland, a truly beautiful city with one of the most vibrant old towns.



Below on the left is the Monument to the Defenders of the Coast. This marks the spot to commemorate the Polish defenders of the Military Transit Depot which is considered to be the first battle of World War 2.



On the right is the Monument to the Fallen Shipyard Workers and marks the spot where Lech Walesa led the workers of the Lenin Shipyard to form the Solidarity Union in the uprising that many view as the first step in the falling of the Iron Curtain. The intentionally rusty looking building in the back is the European Solidarity Centre.

While in Gdansk, we attended an organ concert at Oliwa Cathedral played on this incredible instrument containing 7876 pipes. It was capable of a remarkable range of sounds.



In Gdansk we visited St Mary's Cathedral which contains an amazing 15<sup>th</sup> century astronomical clock which still keeps time today. Its complex dials show the time and date, phases of the moon, the position of the Moon and Sun in relation to the zodiac signs, and the calendar of saints. Adam and Eve ring the bell on the hour, and at noon a procession appears that features Adam and Eve alongside the Three Kings, and the 12 Apostles. Standing 46 ft tall, upon completion, the clock was the largest in the world, and it is believed to remain the largest wooden astronomical clock in existence.





On the streets of Gdansk's Old Town, the rain gutters are frequently seven stories above the street. They collect water which then plummets down vertical pipes (see my yellow line in the next photo), where it turns a 90-degree corner and spews out the intricately carved gargoyles that are at chest level along the sidewalk (next photo). When all that potential energy of height gets turned into kinetic energy of motion during the fall, that water has enough energy to literally spray all the way across the street. No staying dry during a walk in the rain there.



Interesting dragon shaped gargoyles abound on churches throughout Scandinavia, channeling rainwater from the roofs and spewing it out to drench walking passersby on the street below.



Our tour also visited several spots in Sweden. We spent a day in the historic city of Visby on the island of Gotland. Visby's claim to fame is its medieval wall which still encircles the city.



Also in Sweden, we visited Stockholm harbor, which is an extremely busy port.



The Gamla Stan of Stockholm is a wonderful old town with beautiful old buildings and quaint little shops and cafes. It is a great spot to spend a day wandering.



Sundsvall, Sweden is noted for its many architecturally interesting stone buildings. The downtown was completely rebuilt in stone after the earlier versions burnt to the ground twice. As a result, they adopted

the dragon as their mascot, for good luck, and many of them decorate the downtown.



There are literally thousands of Islands in the Bay of Bothnia at the top of the Baltic Sea. Between the Turku, Kemi and Stockholm archipelagos, there are over 50,000 islands, many with small homes or lighthouses.



We visited Turku, Finland and its castle and cathedral.



This old wooden windmill in Oulu, Finland not only had a mechanism to take the wind power from the turning blades and convert it to rotation of a grain-grinding wheel inside – but it also was able to rotate on the frame below so that it could be turned into the wind.





Up in Lapland, at the top of the Bay of Bothnia, we had two wonderful experiences. The first was an afternoon on a two masted sailing ship. The second was a visit to a moose farm where Wendy and I got to feed a family of baby moose and pet the nose of a rather large adult.





Arhaus, Denmark completed our exploration of the Baltic. It had some lovely old structures, just as many of the cities had.

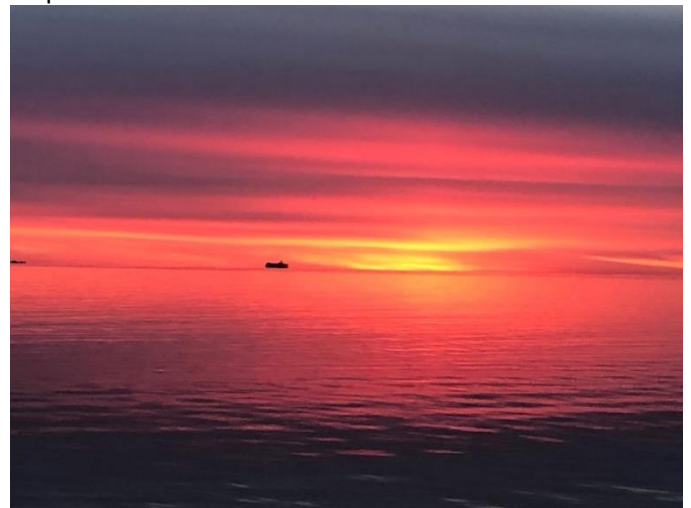


One of the unique things about Lutheran churches in Scandinavia is that they all have a scale model sailing ship hanging from the ceiling of the sanctuary. I have wondered about this custom since our first visit to Norway five years ago. It appears to have two sources of origin. The custom of hanging a replica of a ship pre-dates Christianity when people believed that the offering of a miniature ship would assure a safe voyage for a ship and its crew. In the Christian era, this ancient custom coincided with a Christian metaphor

comparing the church itself to a ship. The Christian life is viewed as a journey over the sea and a well-known hymn reads: "Jesus, Savior, pilot me over life's tempestuous sea." This one from Arhaus was the most striking on our Baltic tour.



As the sun sets on our full-time stay in Scotland (or the Baltic Sea, as the case may be), we will be forever glad that we had this wonderful opportunity. And as we continue to own a house in both countries, we are likely to continue our journey in the future....at a somewhat slower pace.



*"Did not strong connections draw me elsewhere, I believe Scotland would be the country I would choose to end my days in."* ....Benjamin Franklin