



**Caithness Flag**



**Caithness Golden  
With Gorse**

## **Follies, Fairy Cakes and Fast & Fine Cars**

Driving the A9 south toward civilization, I have noticed a couple of curious structures standing on the hill above the Berriedale Braes, so I decided to do a bit of investigating. The first photo shows how they appear from the layby descending the tricky switchback in the A9. After parking in the layby, I had to hike down the hill, cross the river on a swinging bridge, and ascend the other side of the valley. And of course, repeat in reverse to get back to my car. I had tired legs at the end of that morning.



As you can see from the close-up pictures, I made it, after quite a climb. These two structures, according to the story I was told, are follies. A folly is a structure built for no useful purpose, other than someone decided to build it. In this case, the story goes, during a poor harvest season, the estate owner decided to pay his farming crofters to haul the stones and build these towers, so that he had an excuse to pay them a wage that would allow them to survive the bad harvest. The fact that I found them listed by a European organization that catalogs follies, lends some credence to this tale. They are cataloged as Berriedale Watch Tower and Chess Castle (I assume because it looks like the traditional Rook chess piece)

Watch Tower has a bench in the opening, and from its seat, you get the beautiful view below. God made Caithness for mornings like this.



I have discovered a number of tasty foods over here that you don't encounter in the states. One of the tastiest is the Fairy Cake. Take an American cup cake, and carve out the center from the top. Fill the hole with cream or custard, and cut the part you removed in half and stick the halves into the custard so they stick up like a fairy's wings, and you have a Fairy Cake.



I discovered that Caithness has an Autocross Club. However, it is not autocross (or “Solo” in SCCA terminology) as we know it in the USA, where cars compete one at a time on paved circuits marked with orange pylons, or “cones.” Autocross here is more like what Americans call Rallycross, where cars slog across open fields. I borrowed this photo from their website to show what it is about.



I also found, and joined, the Caithness Vintage & Classic Vehicle Club. They had a tour, beginning from Thurso harbor, one recent Sunday.



The most unique cars – some not seen in the USA – were the Alvis, The Triumph Dolomite, and the Hillman shown in these photos.



I mentioned previously that through the university, I had become involved with the educational outreach side of the Bloodhound project to break the World Land Speed Record (WLSR) of 763 miles per hour. May was a busy month for that, as six northern high schools had signed on to participate in the student competition, and North Highland College was the Hub for all schools in the north. That’s me, waaaaay at the top of the map.



I was coordinating with the schools, getting their Bloodhound kits to them to build for the competition, and overseeing the competition for the north, held at our campus.



Additionally, some of the schools, upon learning that I had a background in motorsports and in educational outreach, invited me to make



presentations to their classes. So the month of May involved a lot of travel up and down the A9.

This project is particularly exciting to me, as WLSR cars are some of the most innovative motorsports vehicles ever envisioned. And they have had my interest ever since The Spirit of America jet powered car broke the WLSR in my youth, and its creator and driver, Craig Breedlove, became one of my childhood heroes. I recall having a plastic Spirit of America with which I broke several Basement World Speed Records during my childhood.



Of course, a number of WLSR holders were British, most notably Sir Malcolm Campbell, who broke the record more times than any other man, and his son, Donald Campbell, who followed in his father's footsteps and broke the record himself. I am currently reading the biography of Donald written by his wife after he perished in a crash on Conniston Water in the Lake District, trying to set a World Water Speed Record. All of the Campbell's record attempt cars and boats were named "Bluebird," allegedly after Sir Malcolm saw a stage play which featured the Bluebird of Happiness: ever elusive and ever just out of reach. He claimed that's what the WLSR was, always elusive and always just out of reach, because no matter how fast you went to get the record, there was always another record, just a little faster, and just out of reach, waiting for you. Last year, during my Fulbright, Wendy and I visited the museum in the Lake District where they have a display of one of Malcolm's cars and one of Donald's boats.



The current Bloodhound team is being led by Richard Noble, who himself set the record over a decade ago in Thrust 2, and then led the team that built Thrust SSC, the car that propelled Andy Green to the current record of 763 mph, and made him the first man to travel at supersonic speed on the earth's surface. Bloodhound aims to break that record in 2017 and then try for 1000 mph in 2018.

Relative to the educational aspect of the project, Noble is a strong believer that we need to attract our best young minds to science and engineering. He feels that the current generation of students has not been encouraged to embrace the world's challenges and find solutions to them, the way engineers are trained to do. To paraphrase him, "Our biggest crisis is not the financial crisis, the shortage of water, rising population or global warming. It is the failure to inspire a generation with the belief that they can shape the world."

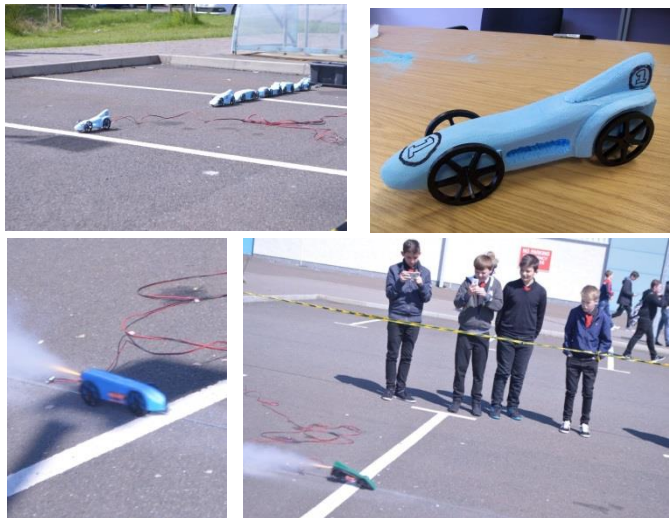
To give the students some examples, I built two cars myself, a replica of Spirit of America and one of the Bloodhound.





On 23 May our college hosted over 150 students who brought 33 cars. I was in charge of the day and it was quite an affair, as shown in these photos from the school's media dept. Our winning team was four girls from Tain, shown in the fifth photo. The event made the news:

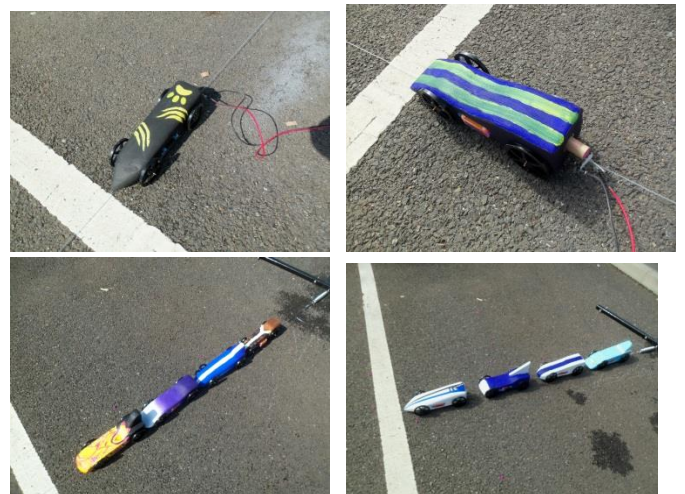
<http://www.bloodhoundssc.com/news/rocket-car-racers>



Not all cars were a success.



But many were impressive.



After I joined the Caithness and Sutherland Vintage & Classic Vehicle Club, I got drafted into helping with their big event of the year, the John O' Groats Rally (actually a huge car show). Over 100 vintage and classic cars entered and there was a large turnout of locals on a lovely Caithness day.





Lots of interesting cars. A Wolseley, a Triumph Stag, a Ford rally car, and an MG TF....built after MG closed, by the guy who bought the rights to the plans, so it is essentially a modern original MG.



A 1947 Sunbeam Talbot, an Alvis, an MG TD and an MGB-GT.



A 1952 Chevy Pickup turned into a Scottish version of a low-rider, a Hillman, a Jaguar E-Type and a VW microbus camper



A Lotus Super Seven, an Austin, a Morris Minor and a Hillman Imp.



I met a lot of interesting folk at the event, but the most interesting was probably Don Mason, an ex-RAF pilot who flew 94 missions in World War 2. Below is a model of the Stirling bomber that he flew alongside the letter from the Prime Minister thanking him for his service, and the silk map that was always sown into his jumpsuit in case he was ever shot down in enemy territory. After the war he had it made into a tie.



He may never have been shot down in enemy territory,.....but..... He was on a mission to bomb Hanover, Germany, when his Stirling took a major hit that destroyed the rudder, the elevator controls, and an outboard engine. With no elevator or rudder, and unbalanced engines, the plane would only fly in a giant arc. He figured out where that arc would most closely approach Britain, and that is where he ditched the plane at sea. The crew



survived in an inflatable life raft until a navy ship rescued them. A mere month later, he was on a bombing run to Berlin, when an enemy fighter ripped the side of the Stirling open. Half the crew was killed and Don took shrapnel in his spine as well as facial lacerations that blinded him in one eye. Knowing half the crew was still alive and had only him to get them home, he flew the wounded craft back to England, solo, in that condition. He was in the hospital a year before he was released and decommissioned because the eye injury made him ineligible as a pilot.

He re-enlisted, retrained as a navigator and a radioman and went back into the RAF. On one subsequent mission his was the sole aircraft to return to England from an attempt to take out the German facility in Norway that was known to be working on Germany's version of the atomic bomb. He ended the war navigating the mail run that flew from Lyneham, to Gibraltar, to Algiers, to Palestine, to Basra, to Karachi, to Delhi, to Bombay to Kuala Lumpur. Return and repeat. He flew in support of D-Day, in Operation Freshman, in Operation Market Garden, and in the bombings of Hanover and Berlin. 94 missions. I am not sure they make men like that anymore.

I recently had to attend a meeting in Glasgow for the university. I had forgotten what the Big City is like.

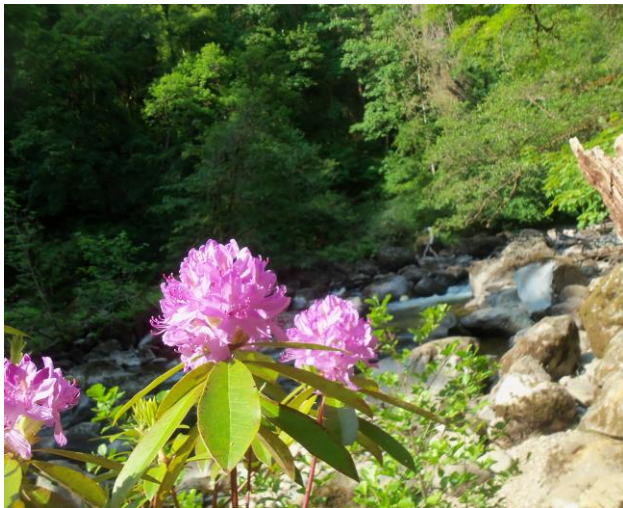


Oh my, Toto, we're not in Caithness anymore. Here are photos of Buchanan Street in the shopping district and George's Square, followed by the statues of Scotland's most famous engineer, James Watt, and Wellington's statue (which always seems to acquire that odd hat).





The road was long and tiring (this from a man who, back in the USA, used to drive further than that in a day just to get to a racetrack so I could drive some more). I made a stop at a park called The Hermitage, with some lovely hiking trails. It was a bit like this first picture looks.....a passage away from the day to day problems of life, into a refreshingly quiet and peaceful world.



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