

The Emerald Isle



There is clearly good reason that Ireland is called the Emerald Isle. There are more shades of green than I have ever seen. Daughter Aeron and the University of Southern Indiana Chamber Choir were in Ireland for a week, competing in the Mayo International Choral Competition. With Ireland only a short hop over the water, I had to go see Aeron, and the choir, compete. I stayed in the wee town of Newport, which is built on two levels, and therefore has two separate old stone bridges to cross the river.



The students asked me how Scotland differed from Ireland, and I had wondered myself. The central part of the island seems to be much like the Scottish Borders.....very green, with rolling hills and twisting roads. And there are lots of lakes (lochs in Scotland), and streams.



As you get closer to the coast, the mountains pop up, and it feels a bit more like entering the Scottish Highlands as you approach Glencoe.



There are also a few Neolithic standing stones and tombs, like this one, which is a bit different from the ones I usually show you from Caithness.



And the roads are similar too.



USI's first concert was in the town of Westport, at the Church of the Holy Trinity (built 1868). They performed a number of their typical songs, but then closed with a trio of Irish tunes, two in Gaelic. The locals were amazed at how well they did those numbers, and gave them a standing ovation.



Between concerts, I visited Croagh Patrick, one of the most holy Catholic sites in Ireland. Saint Patrick traveled this area in the year 441 and supposedly meditated for 40 days and nights on the top of the mountain in the background before driving the snakes from Ireland.



The second USI concert was at Ballintubber Abbey. Saint Patrick baptized locals in this area in 441 and it became a place of worship. Then in 1216 the abbey was built. In the intervening 800 years, the Abbey has been in continuous use for worship, even after the Cromwell era when Catholics were persecuted and the roof was torn from the structure. For over 200 years worship continued without a roof, in all kinds of weather and with grass growing in the sanctuary. The structure did not have heat until 10 years ago.



The abbey grounds have some ancient, yet elaborate, headstones.



The choir also did a performance at the Mayo Peace Park and Remembrance Garden, which salutes the Irish soldiers who fought for freedom in wars at home and abroad.



The opening competition was in Castlebar at Christchurch Cathedral, built in 1739.



The USI choir did a spectacular job, winning the Four Part Music competition, the Sacred Music competition, and took second in the Gaelic Language competition. Having won a category, they qualified for the Gala Concert and overall competition against the other winners. They claimed first place in this finale, becoming USI's first winner in international competition. They were wonderful and it was great to be part of it.



Returning from Ireland, I headed home to Caithness, which is gloriously beautiful in blooming golden gorse.



Have you detected that I have become quite fond of life here in Caithness? Aye,.....I have.

In all of bonnie Scotland,
It's the lands that lie northwest,
Whose hills and fields and shoreline,
I have come to love the best.

.....folk song lyric

This next photo is of the Meadow Well, which sits in the middle of Thurso, our new hometown.



It was the town's main water supply for hundreds of years, and like many of the buildings in the town, has been preserved.



This includes the remains of the St Peters Kirk, founded in the year 1220 by the Bishop of Caithness.



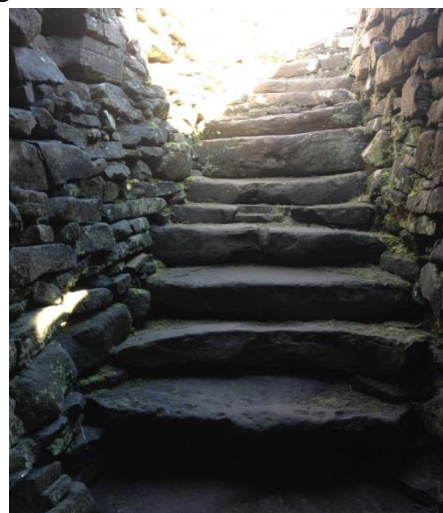
Carn Liath is one of the many Brochs, or Neolithic stone villages, in Caithness, and one of the most complete. This is the approach to the main entrance.



The next photo is taken from the inside, and shows a ramp leading upwards from the right, that would have been an access to an upper room. You can also see a doorway on the left.



If you enter that doorway, you see a stairway leading up to yet another higher level room. All the rooms were built in to the outer wall, leaving the open center area as the communal gathering area.



As the community grew, additional rooms might be added stretching outward from the main structure. The remains of some of those rooms can be seen in the next photo.



There is a group here who refer to themselves as the Caithness Broch Project. They assist archeological exploration of ancient sites. In general, such sites are not reconstructed, merely excavated. (If it ain't broch, don't fix it ????)

They also have a long term goal of building a historically accurate complete broch as a tourist and educational center. Something more for me to get involved with.

I have mentioned the number of cairns, brochs and standing stones that you find around Caithness. I pass this broch every time I head south. It was built on a wee spit of land sticking out into the loch, so it would have been easy to defend.



Next are the Achavanich Standing Stones. These are unique, although no one has figured out

the reason. Rather than being erected in a circle, like most standing stone groups, they are in a horseshoe shape. Additionally, most stone rings are placed with the broad side of the stones facing the center of the formation, but this one has them with the thin edge facing the center.



The car behind the standing stones in the next photo is my new (used) car,...."Nissie." First Nissan I have owned since a racecar best forgotten back in the 1980's.



Caithness can be an enigma as regards time. The two photos below are an example. The first shows the Cnoc Freiceadain Cairns from perhaps 5000 years ago, with a field of wind turbines in the background. The next one shows a traditional Caithness stone wall, probably built 200 years ago, with the Dounreay nuclear power plant in the background.



An interesting site to visit is the Clearance Village of Badbea. After the Jacobite Rebellion of 1745 was smashed by the English, much of the Highlands were placed under English overlords as a way of both punishing and controlling the Highland Scots who had taken part in the uprising aimed at putting the deposed King James Stewart back on his rightful throne of both England and Scotland. By the way, modern day Jacobites point out that using the true lineage of the deposed Stewart line, the rightful heir to the crown of the United Kingdom is not George, the young son of William and Kate.....but rather Princess Sophie of Liechtenstein, a descendant of the Stewart kings.

But I digress,..... many of these overlords forced the Scottish crofters off of their farms so that the land could be used for huge sheep farms. These clearances in the wake of the rebellion forced inland farmers to the coasts where many tried to change to fishing for a living. Badbea was such a village in the early 1800s. They ended

up living between the stone wall that marked the end of the sheep grazing territory.....a wall that still runs along the coast today.....and the windswept coast.



By the mid-1800s most of them had left Scotland completely, for Ireland, Nova Scotia in Canada, or the Carolinas in America. All that remains today is the wall.....and the ruins of the village cottages hiding in the golden gorse.



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