

# Spring Comes to the Highlands

You can tell when spring arrives in the Highlands because the Snowdrops and Heather come into bloom. These were the first we saw this spring.....in our own garden.



We decided to watch the opening game of the Six Nations Tournament (Scotland vs. Wales) at the local pub with some of our students from the college.....who had dressed for the occasion.



Molly, our dawg, loves to go walking and the spring weather made it possible again. We frequently use the foot paths through either of the two local wind farms. She likes to wander amongst the giants, and sometimes when she barks at them, they wave their arms at her. It was our first visit this spring to this particular farm and we startled a pair of Capercaillie out of the brush. First time I have ever seen them in the wild.



And of course, in Scotland it can't be spring if you haven't been to a Burns Night complete with music, poems, toasts, and of course haggis, neeps, 'n tatties and men in kilts. We went to two Burns Suppers held by the local Masonic Lodges where I am involved.



.....in our kilts, of course.



You might be interested to hear about one of the classes taught in our engineering program. It requires the students to assess renewable energy sources to power a local manufacturing facility. They have to evaluate a local forestry resource



To provide wood chips for a bio-mass boiler





and compare it to hydro-electric energy from the nearby river



using water channeled down an old mill race



and ....of course compare those to....Caithness wind power.



Naturally, we picked the coldest, snowiest day of the year to go traipsing around the county to all these sites.

On a slightly sunnier day, dawg and I went for a hike along the Dunbeath Strath. It was a bit like a walk back in time. We left the main carriage-way at the modern bridge, and followed a minor carriageway to the early 1900's stone bridge, where we turned onto a one-track-road to the parking spot



Then we started down the trail along the strath (river valley or gorge).



Next was a stone wall from a late 1800's estate.





And then we passed an early 1800's drover's inn.



And the remains of a 1600's monastery.

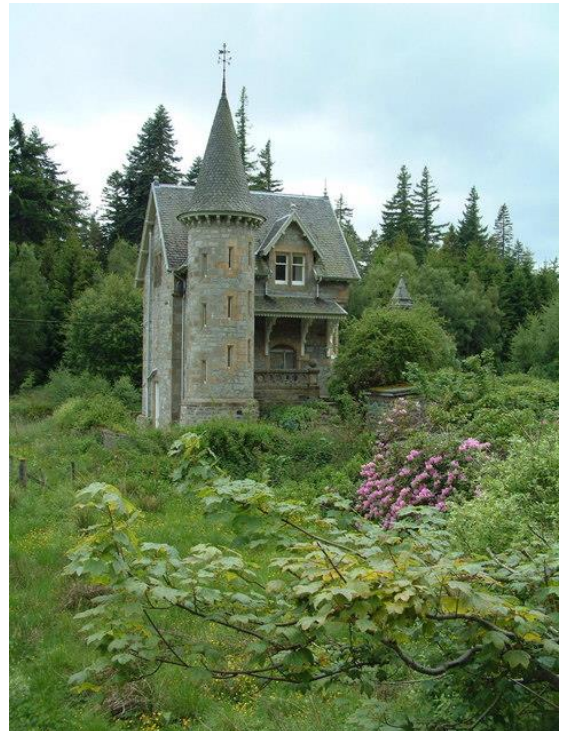


And on to a Neolithic stone broch, which would have served as the communal village a few thousand years ago.



Molly insisted on exploring that small opening, which led to a room built within the outer and inner walls of the broch. It was about 6 feet tall, 6 feet long, and 3 feet wide.

My anniversary gift to Wendy this year was to book her for a day long workshop with a specialty candy-maker near Aberfeldy, after we saw her on Countryfile on TV where she discussed her specialty – making herbal flavored chocolates, which naturally caught Wendy's interest. I also booked us for two nights into this amazing little self-catering cottage in a renovated gatelodge at the entrance to a historic estate. It looks like something out of a fairytale.



While Wendy was at the workshop the dawg and I went hill walking. First stop was Hermit's cave.



Which then led us to a view of lower Acharn Falls, and then, as we climbed further, eventually the upper falls as well. Things were gushing along quite well, with the runoff from the snow on the Cairngorm Mountains surrounding us.





We kept climbing until we reached the remains of a prehistoric stone circle at the peak.



After descending, we visited a reconstructed Iron Age Crannog. The remains of 17 of these homesteads have been found around this loch, and several have been excavated. Archeologists have taken what they learned and built one in the same manner that they appear to have been built centuries ago. There are nearly 200 logs cut to create this structure, with many of them sunk two meters deep into the bottom of the loch. All of this was done using small iron-age axes about 18 inches long, with a 2 inch blade as seen here.





When we returned, the chocolate making was over, and they had created some interesting flavors, like rosemary, basil & lime, and passion fruit and ginger. NOT your everyday flavors. But she had a good time.

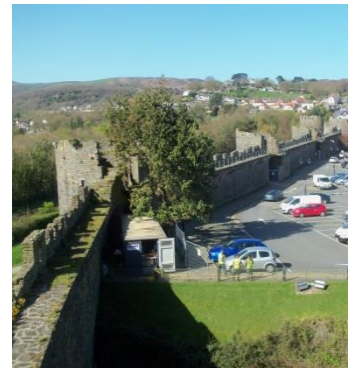
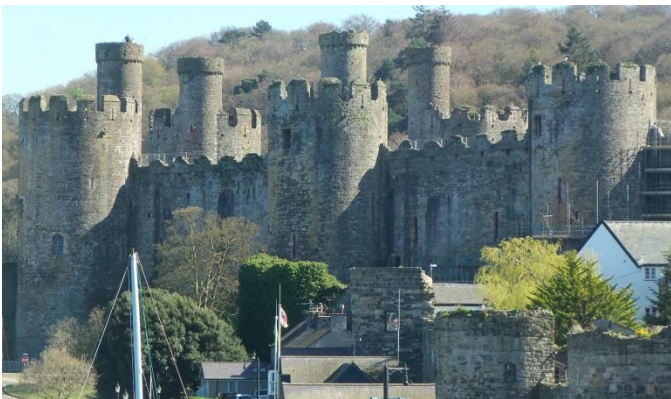


Last year I joined the European Masonic Association (EMA). This year our spring meeting was in the lovely seaside town of Llandudno in Wales.



If you don't know where Llandudno is, it is located between Dwygyfylchi and Gwaenysgor, just a bit north of Pentre-tafarn-y-fedw, on the north Wales coast.

We toured the town of Conwy, where we had the opportunity to visit Conwy Castle and walk the walls of the old medieval city. Entrances to the town are through the original gates in the wall. If you like castles, I have included a selection of pictures of the castle and city walls.





The castle was built in the 1280's by King Edward as part of his effort to subdue the Welsh. We checked out the rest of Conwy, including the Elizabethan Plas Mawr House, one of the earliest suspension bridges, built by Scottish Engineer Thomas Telford in 1822 and also the world's smallest house – which for one pound you can step inside....and that is literally all you can do. There is a bench, a stove, a bed and barely room to turn around. It was actually lived in until the early 1900's.



We also had some meetings, some shopping, time for mingling with friends, and a truly Welsh gala dinner featuring Terrine of Welsh cheese followed by leek & potato soup. Braised shoulder of Welsh lamb was followed by custard over a bread pudding made with a Welsh fruit bread called bara brith. After dinner entertainment was provided by Cantorion Gogledd Cymru ('The North Wales Choir'), a gathering of 30 excellent male voices.

After that we said goodbye to lovely Wales: gwlad beirdd a chantorion, enwogion o fri (land of poets and singers, and people of stature) and headed back north for a weekend in the Orkney Islands, where I went exploring in a couple of 5000 year old stone burial cairns. First there was Cuween Hill Chambered Cairn, which you find by climbing this hill toward the standing stones.



These are usually entered by a long crawlway.



Once inside, there is often a surprising amount of room. The main chamber of this one was 8 feet tall, with four side chambers, each around six feet tall.



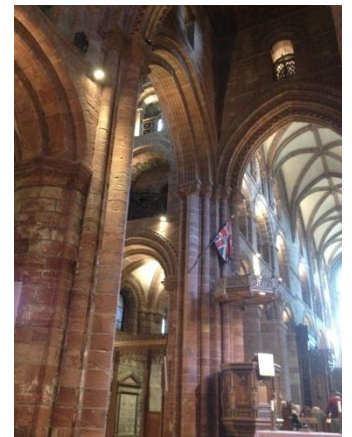
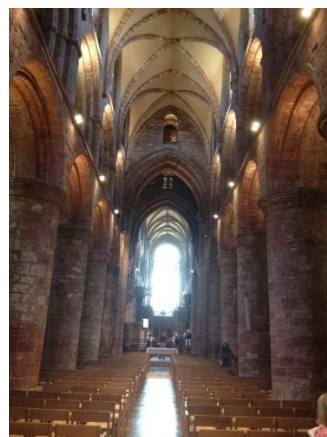




Next I hiked a mile and a quarter around the ridge of a hill to Wideford Hill Chambered Cairn. It is quite different looking from the outside, with terraced walls. It is also unique in that it is entered from a trap door in the top. That isn't the original entrance, as it had a crawlway like all the others. However, the crawlway is not excavated enough, and the roof had collapsed, so a protective hatch way is now installed on top, which you can move so as to climb down in.



Also on this trip, we attended church service at St. Magnus Cathedral. Magnus is the patron saint of the Orkney Islands. The cathedral was begun in 1137, when Orkney still belonged to Norway. After the islands came under Scotland in 1468, and then the Scottish reformation occurred in the mid-1500s, King James gave the cathedral to the people of Orkney. It is maintained in trust, and while it holds weekly Church of Scotland services, it is available for use by any Christian denomination.



That's about it for our spring travels. We are excitedly looking forward to having friends from the

USA to visit us this summer, as well as a return to Norway. And I have a number of race track visits planned.

One thing about the Highlands....if you do any traveling, you end up on a lot of one track roads. These are bi-directional roads that are only one lane wide, with occasional passing places. They are the norm, rather than the exception way up here.



We are thoroughly used to them....but visitors from America are usually rather uncomfortable with them. The dawg and I composed a song to them during one of our walks.

### **Take Me Home, One Track Roads** (with apologies to John Denver)

Almost heaven, Scottish Highlands,  
Rugged coastline, heather by the roadside,  
Life is old there, older than the trees,  
Younger than the stone cairns, blowing Caithness breeze.

One track roads, take me home,  
To the place I belong,  
To the Highlands,  
Scotland's far north.  
Take me home,  
One track roads.

My best memories, gather round her,  
Northern Highlands, surrounded by blue water.  
Hills of gold gorse, reaching to the sky.  
Misty taste of whisky, teardrop in my eye.

One track roads, take me home  
To the place I belong,  
To the Highlands,  
Scotland's far north.  
Take me home,  
One track roads.

I hear her voice, in the gloaming hours she calls me.  
BBC reminds me of my home far away.  
Driving down the road I ken the feeling  
That I should have been home yesterday, yesterday.

One track roads, take me home  
To the place I belong,  
To the Highlands,  
Scotland's far north.  
Take me home,  
One track roads.



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

Benjamin Franklin