

Summer Explorations in Scotland

It is a glorious summer in the Highlands. The weather has been remarkably sunny and warm and the hillsides are bright with golden gorse in bloom.



I took a hike to the top of a mountain in nearby Sutherland, to visit the Frynish Monument. It is a folly that was built in the 1780's. As the story goes, times were tough and the crofters were having a difficult time paying their taxes. So General Sir Hector Munro hired them to construct three follies (structures which serve no true purpose). This provided them with the money to pay their taxes, and thus they did not lose their homes. This is the largest and best known of the follies. Sir Hector claimed that all three were designed to resemble the gates of fortresses in India which he led in capturing. He said he wished to commemorate the victory and offer it as memorial to the troops that he lost in the battle. But the belief is that the real purpose was to help the poor crofters. There is an additional story that he actually rolled some of the stones back downhill at night so as to prolong the work and allow the crofters to earn more.



From the top I had an excellent view of the Cormarty Firth, and the oil rigs which are towed in for maintenance work at Cromarty. You can see them all lined up in a row, waiting, in this picture.



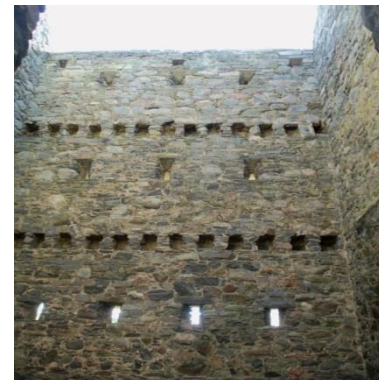
On a drive down through the Highlands, I stopped at the Ruthven Barracks.



They were constructed in 1715 by the English after the first Jacobite uprising. They were intended to house troops who would maintain the peace in the Highlands. In the 1945 Jacobite uprising, when Bonnie Prince Charlie marched through Scotland, his troops captured Ruthven. Unfortunately, he made the mistake of continuing on into England, where his campaign fell apart. Loyal Scots troops were still in control of the Barracks after the Prince's defeat at Culloden, when he sent out the message "let every man seek his own safety in the best way he can." Charlie then fled to Italy and left the Highlands to suffer the wrath of the English for years to come.



In the next picture you can see the holes in the barrack walls where the floor beams were supported as well as the windows which were narrow for defensive purposes.



Then it was on to Knockhill, Scotland's foremost racing circuit. Wendy got me a season pass for this year. This first big weekend saw over 100 of these wee beasts (called Caterhams) competing in four classes with progressively more racy engines and suspensions.



There were also Formula Fords which are cousins to the ones in America (although in the UK they race on street tires rather than the USA slicks). There was also a Mazda series, which resembled the Spec Miata class in Sports Car Club of America racing. And there was a class for Porsche Boxsters.



The top class for the weekend was the TCR touring car series comprised of Vauxhalls & Alfa Romeos and some lovely little VW GTIs that I would love to get my hands on after my 30 years of racing them in America. There were also Hyundai and Honda teams. They ran the course in reverse direction from the BTCC races that I went to last autumn. But the cars get airborne over the curbs regardless of direction.



These clam-shell type trailers are very popular over here. I do not recall ever seeing one like it in the USA.



The anthem was by a piper on the grid. You can see that British Touring Cars are still using grid girls, despite the fact that Formula One has stopped using them. However, here they are members of the team, usually working in marketing and promotion roles and sometimes are the partners of the drivers or team owners. They are not scantily clad models with no racing connection the way they were in Formula One.



I stayed in this lovely little 17th century inn and pub. They have done an excellent job of modernizing it while still maintaining a historic ambiance.



On Saturday evening I ventured over to a short oval track in Cowdenbeath. The track is called Racewall. This is actually an appropriate name for all 3 of the Scottish short tracks that I have visited. All of them are built down into a hole in the ground, such that the top of the wall is level with the exterior ground on which the spectators walk and the stands are built. So looking down into the track is like looking down into a bowl, where the dominant feature is the wall running all the way around the track. This is completely different from most American tracks, where the racing surface is at ground level, and the wall is a structure built above the ground.

I went specifically to see the Vintage Hot Rods. The term “hot rod” in America usually means an older model street car which has been fancied up into a showy street car. In the UK, the term “hot rod” refers to a street sedan which has been highly modified for oval track stock car racing. There are three national traveling series for hot rods. Last year you may recall that I spent a weekend crewing for a young man driving an old Nova in the 2.0 Hot Rod series. These are 2.0 liter engine small sedans, with wings and aerodynamic body work. The higher class, which I have yet to see, is the National Hot Rod series, where the chassis are tube frame and the technology is similar to NASCAR stock cars. The third traveling series is the Vintage Hot Rods, which are 1970’s or 1980’s models that are still racing. The most interesting cars are old Ford Anglias built from 1939-67.



The most common car is the Ford Escort built from 1968-2004.



There are also Toyota Starlets and other such more recent sedans. There were two lesser, local classes competing, called Pro-Stocks and Saloon-Stocks. Most of them looked like they had been dropped off a cliff and then kicked around a bit by a giant. I didn't spend much time watching them.



While I was in Fife, I attended a local masonic lodge meeting at Lodge Castle Dour in Aberdour. After the meeting, we headed over to the local hotel for a festive board lunch consisting of soup, steak pie with veg, and sticky toffee pudding. We ate in a remarkable room shown in the picture below. All of the wood and glass was originally part of a sailing ship that was decommissioned nearby, and someone had the foresight to take it apart carefully rather than scraping it. It was then carefully reassembled to create this remarkable dining room.



Aberdour is a scenic and historic village of about 1500 people on the north shore of the Firth of Forth. The origin of the village name itself is Pictish, implying an origin in the Dark Ages. The name comes from the place where the water from the River Dour meets the firth. Dour Castle overlooks the river and the oldest part of the semi-ruin constitutes one of the earliest surviving stone castles in Scotland. The start of the structure dates to the 13th century with additions made for several centuries afterwards. Some of the less ruined bits of the castle were used in the filming of Outlander.



A portion of the castle wall (a LARGE portion) fell and lies alongside. That must have made a spectacular noise.



There are a number of sundials, including this unique vertical one on the wall.



And here is another one in the garden, with a large intact dovecot in the background. While most of the castle is in ruins, the walled garden is maintained and is obviously quite nice.



Looking south you can see the island of Inchcolm and Edinburgh beyond it on the other side of the Firth. The island of Inchcolm has a name derived from the Gaelic for Island of Columba. Its name implies associations dating back to Saint Columba, who established the first Christian worship in Scotland on the Isle of Iona on the other side of Scotland. Thus, Inchholm is sometimes referred to as the Iona of the East. One of these days I plan to make it to the island and explore.



Spent an evening in Inverness and saw the local pipe band practice in front of Inverness Castle.



And a street musician unlike what you would find back home in Indiana.



Nearby St Fillan's Church is one of the best-preserved medieval parish churches in Scotland, dating to the 12th century. It is still in use every Sunday.



Dawg and I have been walking 2-5 miles per day in the lovely spring weather (spring does not come to Caithness until June) and we keep coming across interesting critters.....like this toad masquerading as a stone on the path.....and this friendly cow that rushed over to the fence just to see us.



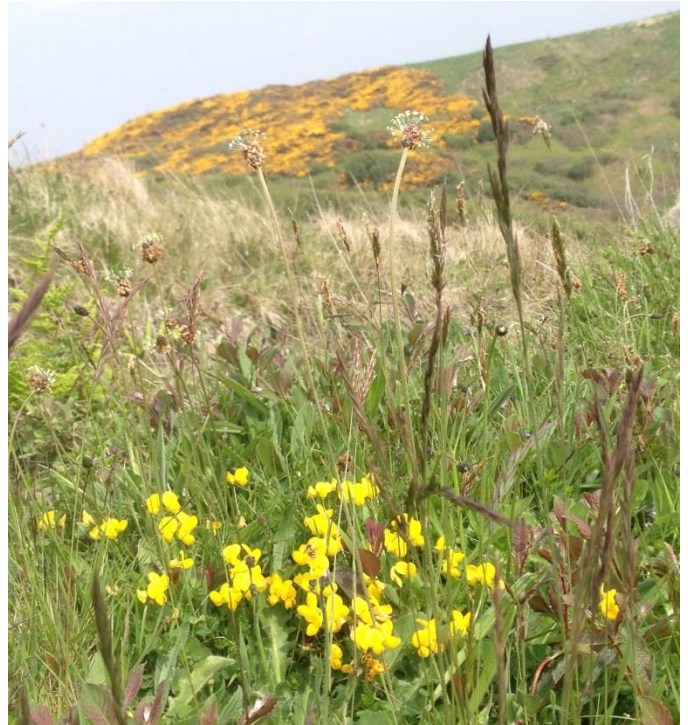
We also found these two lovely snails, feeling the urges of spring, who spotted each other from opposite sides of the trail, and we saw them dashing across the trail into each others arms.....or antennae.....or something.



On the return leg of our hike, we found them looking exhausted under some leaves.



Spring blooms are everywhere. Yellow being the most popular color, ranging from the butter-yellow wee flowers alongside the trail, to the golden gorse covering the hills in the background. Lots of other wildflowers along the trail.





Scots are very intent on saving their history, as I discovered when I found this prehistoric stone circle preserved in the middle of an Inverness industrial park.



The university sent me to Ullapool recently, and I ate dinner looking out at this view of the harbor and mountains.



I recently took a hike to one of Scotland's lesser known, but historically interesting spots, the Brethren Well, here in Caithness. This freshwater spring is named for the fact that it is near the ruins of a priory, and the monks reputedly were the first to use it.

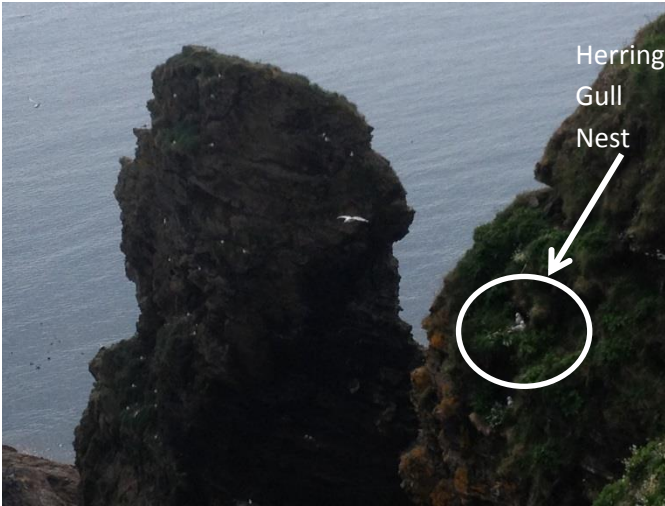


The priory has been dated to the sixth century and is believed to have been an attempt to introduce Christianity to the Picts. This is based on a Pictish carved stone, which has been relocated to a nearby church for preservation purposes. You can see the early Christian cross, consistent with what Pictish Christians, carved, on the upper left of the stone.



The Brethren Well is also known to have been used by ancient crofters, modern farmers, and today some of the older locals believe that it has curative properties for rheumatism, and they send some of their younger family members to bring home water from the well. That means this spring has been in use for over 1500 years, which has to be near to some kind of record.

The trail also went past Herring Gull Stack and Cormorant Rock. The white spots on the stack are all Herring Gull nests, the closest of which you can see on the right with the arrow. The black spots on the water-level rock are Cormorants, sunning themselves after a fishing dive. Cormorant feathers have no water repellent, so after each dive they must spread their wings and dry out in the sun....which they do on this rock.



This is the burn flowing down out of the hills, under the ancient bridge, and into Lybster Harbor.



Another sunny day, another mountaintop in Easter Ross, and another of Sir Hector's 3 follies. And

the third one off on a distant ridge, a bit too far off for me.



I finally got our 1948 MG-TC running again. It had spent all of its 70 years in the USA, having won a number of Sports Car Club of America races in the fifties. But it had never turned a wheel in its native Britain, until this spring. So we excitedly took it to the John O'Groats Vintage Car Rally held annually by the Caithness & Sutherland Vintage Car Club (of which we are members). Our nice display of trophies, drivers gear, and photos from the fifties drew lots of attention from the many spectators, as well as the local newspaper.



Here are a few more of the cars from our age class....a pair of British Racing Green MG T-series...and a row of Wolseleys and Austins.



And a few other eccentric vintage British cars.



I spent a couple of days hiking in the Glen Devon Woodlands, on a trip back to Knockhill. Lots of wonderful hillwalking trails.



And I saw a rare British Red Squirrel (endangered species) with its bushy red tail and tufted ears.....as well as a yellow wagtail.



I also followed the Tower Trail in Clackmannanshire, visiting several historic towers. Here are a few photos. First there was Sauchie Tower, built in the 1430s for protection, and expanded to include a manor house in the 1600s. Only the ruins of the tower stand today. Then there is the tower remaining from the Auchinbaird Windmill, built in the early 1800s to drive a water pump to drain the coal pit which was mined to supply the growth of industry in Scotland



Next was Clackmannan Tower, built in the mid 1300s and owned for four centuries by the family of Robert The Bruce. In 1787 Robert Burns was knighted here.....not by King George, but by a descendent of The Bruce.....who claimed (rightly so) a stronger lineage to the throne of Scotland, than did the imported German who sat on the English throne.



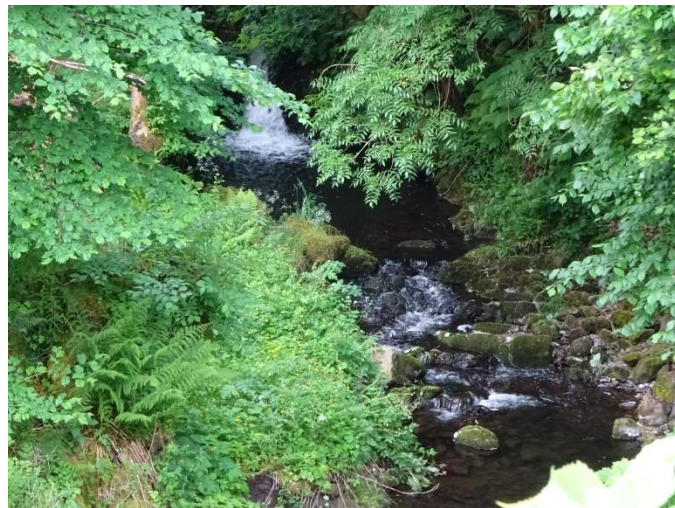
The other photo from the village of Clackmannan (above right) is of the Tolbooth in the middle of town. Built in 1592, it served as courthouse and jail for the shire. To its right is the Mercat Cross, dating from the 17th century and carrying the Bruce coat of arms. A number of Scots villages still have their Mercat Cross intact. These marked the site where the local market (mercata) was held. Further to the right of it is The Stone, a sacred marker from pagan times, dating back to pre-Christianity.

Next was Alloa Tower, which is restored, and can be toured.



And finally, there was Castle Campbell, formerly known as Castle Gloom, because it could only be approached through dense and gloomy woodland, which today is known as Dollar Glen and contains a number of walking trails that crisscross several streams with waterfalls and cascades. It was perhaps the most magically mystical spot I have visited in all of

Scotland....and that is saying a lot. Look carefully to see the wee fairies hiding amongst the ferns.



I headed back to Knockhill and Cowdenbeath Racewall in June. Knockhill was running time trials and races for a wide variety of cars, of which I have included a few photos. They ranged from the common.....



To the sporty....like this SEAT Cupra and Lotus Elise



Or this SEAT Leon Supercopa



To the exotic.....like this Genesis



Or this Westfield





Or this absolutely wild Westfield that looked more like the Batmobile.



Here they tend to run all the classes together, which can make for some really interesting racing.



Cowdenbeath Racewall was hosting a series that rarely comes as far north as Scotland, so I just had to go see them. I talked earlier about the different types of Hot Rods, which is what the UK calls short track racecars which resemble road-going stock cars. They also race several types of single seater, purpose-built racecars that bear some distant resemblance to American sprint cars. But since they have engines based from road-going cars, here they are referred to as stock cars. But they look nothing like what we would call a stock car in the USA. There are F1 stockcars which run Chevy V8 engines that make up to 600 horsepower and F2 stockcars which run 2 liter four cylinder engines. And there are micro stockcars which are for young drivers age 7 and up.



The full sized versions sport a variety of wings. Some look like USA winged dirt sprint cars.



Some take more of a formula car aerodynamics approach



Some run multilevel wings like old Indycars, like this red one. Some run oddly slanted wings like the yellow.



And some run bizarre wings like this.....which I understand are the norm when these cars race on the dirt tracks down in England. Someday I may have to go see one of those races.



That's it for now. We have some American visitors coming this summer and have another visit to Norway planned as well. We are keeping busy for as long as our visas allow us to stay.

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

Benjamin Franklin