

Explorations from Scotland



Scotland

If you have been a regular reader of these newsletters, then you will be familiar with all of the neolithic cairns and brochs that we have visited across our ten years of living and teaching in Scotland. Well, with Wendy back in America on grandmother duty, I visited a new one, remarkably within just a few miles of Edinburgh. It is called Cairnpapple, and seems to sit in the middle of nowhere, even though it is less than 20 miles from Scotland's capital city. It is impressive in size and can be seen from quite some distance as you approach.



From the top of the cairn, you can look outward, and see a circular ring of holes, which, from the foundation work found upon excavation, appear to have once held a ring of standing stones. Beyond that are smaller holes, which again, based on excavation, are believed to have held a henge ring of wooden posts. Beyond that is a ditch and a dyke. The various workings do not all date from the same time period - some of them appear to be neolithic, some early bronze age, some later bronze age, and some later than that. In other words, this was a center of some serious activity for generations.



Climbing down into the excavated cairn, one finds an open grave site, dating from about 2000 BC, and also two later enclosed burial cists.



I have visited many burial cairns in the far north and the northern isles, including some which are pretty large. But this one is right up there with them in terms of how impressive it is. And the Edinburgh residents, mere miles away, are mostly unaware of what is in their backyard.

While at Cairnpapple, I discovered that I was near to Torphichen Preceptory which was once the Scottish headquarters of the Knights Hospitaller of the Order of St John of Jerusalem. I was unable to get inside, but the structure was in impressively good shape for something built in the 1400s.



One of the engineering marvels of Scotland is the Falkirk Wheel – the world’s only rotating boat lift. It transfers boats from the Forth & Clyde Canal to the Union Canal – a height difference of 35 meters, via a rotating system that actually lifts the boat by rotating the giant wheel through 180 degrees during a five-minute transition. It is a truly impressive thing to watch.



Falkirk’s other claim to fame is the best preserved portion of the Antonine Wall. Anyone familiar with Scotland knows of Hadrian’s Wall – the 73 mile long wall, running coast to coast – which was built in the early second century during the reign of Roman Emperor Hadrian. It is a mighty stone barrier, built to keep the heathen Pictish and Scotia tribes north of the wall, and away from civilized Roman Britain. Hadrian’s Wall was punctuated along its length by mighty

fortresses and miletowers, so that the entire wall was watched constantly.

The Antonine Wall was built about 35 years later, under the direction of Emperor Antoninus, in an attempt to push the boundary of Roman Britain further north. However, unlike the massive stone construction of Hadrian’s Wall, this one never progressed beyond an earthen embankment and a few small wooden camps. The effort outdistanced its supply lines and support systems, and ultimately proved a failure. However, in some places, like Falkirk, the embankment can still be traced for considerable distances, as shown in this photo.



One last Scottish photo in this newsletter. There are castle ruins around almost every corner in Scotland, and this one is Rosyth Castle, near the port of Rosyth, where we recently departed on a tour of several European countries, in our effort to see as much as we can before my time at the university here runs out.



England

Quiz Question: Is this a photo of part of: a) The Sahara Desert, b) The Sonora Desert, or c) The Irish Sea?



If you answered c – the Irish Sea, you would be correct. I had reason to attend a meeting of the European Masonic Association in the Lake District of England – specifically a lovely little village called Grange-over-sands – whose pretty logo is shown below.



The village sits on the north side of Morecambe Bay, which is part of the Irish Sea.



The bay is a shallow estuary, which at low tide, is completely drained. You can actually walk across it from the town of Morecambe to the village of Grange-over-sands. But beware of incoming tides, as people have been known to get caught out there and drown when the tide came in.

I walked out a ways at low tide, and took the first photo below looking back at Grange-over-sands (now you

understand its odd name), and one 180 degrees opposite, looking across the bay to Morecambe in the distance.



Morecambe Bay has two other noteworthy claims to fame. It is the home to the smallest eatable shrimp, known as the Morecambe Shrimp. The picture below left shows about 50 of the little guys on a Ritz sized cracker. The final claim to fame is a football (soccer) team with one of the oddest names ever – the Morecambe Shrimps – logo below right.



The village was quaint, with a lovely promenade along the water (sand?) frontage.



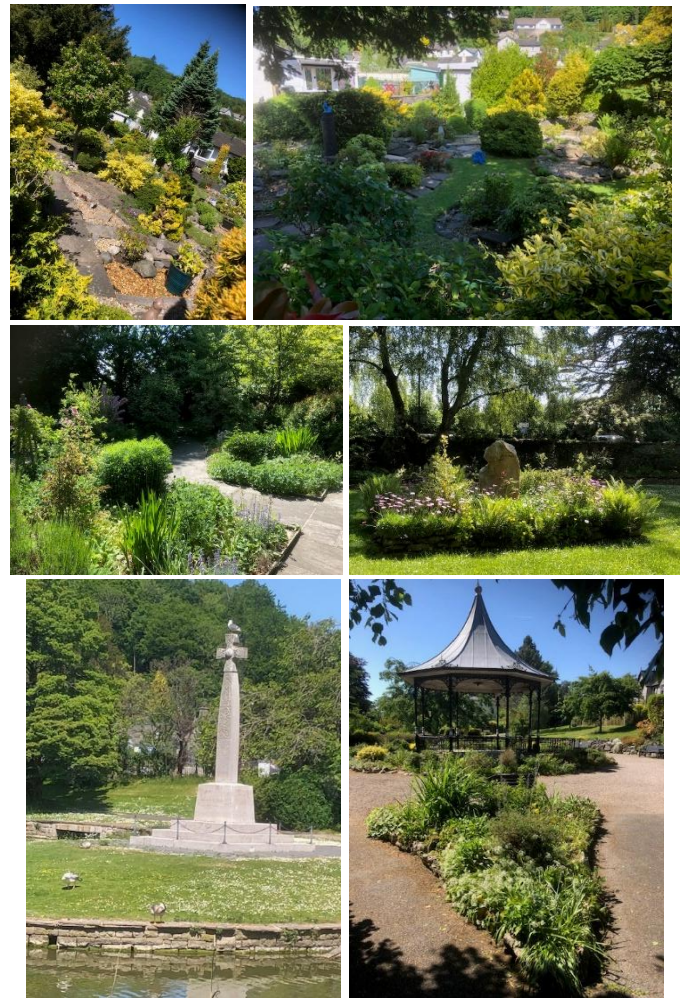
At the center of Grange-over-sands is the lovely St Paul's church and the adjacent clock tower.



Perhaps the most interesting thing about the village was that flowers were growing everywhere. Even the walls were covered with them.



And there were beautiful gardens everywhere you looked.



If you want to visit the British Lake District, and prefer a small peaceful village to the larger busy, tourist filled towns (like Windermere or Coniston) I highly recommend Grange-over-sands.

Denmark

With my project for the University of Highlands and Islands drawing to a close, we have decided to make the most of my last year on contract with the university, and explore as much as we can. Our latest whirl-wind tour of Europe began with a transit through the Kiel Canal – a 61 mile long canal cutting through the south of Denmark and the north of Germany in order to connect the North Sea to the Baltic Sea, without having to go all the way around the northern most tip of Denmark. This next photo shows our ship being guided into the locks by a tug, so that we could enter the canal. The locks are necessary because the North Sea and Baltic Sea are separated by enough distance that the

sea levels are seldom the same, and thus the locks must accommodate the difference.



While in Denmark, we visited Kronborg Castle, in Elsinore – famous for being the setting for Shakespeare’s Hamlet. We walked the ramparts on a sunny day – so no chance to look for the ghosts.



Germany

Having traversed the canal, we spent an afternoon in the lovely village of Wismar, Germany, with its lovely market square. Many of the towns and villages in this part of Europe have a well preserved “old town” which is usually the most interesting bit and well worth the visit.



Latvia

In Latvia, I took an interesting hike in Gaugu National Park, with lovely views of some old castles peeking through the woodlands. This included a visit to the largest cave in any of the Baltic states. According to legend, the spring flowing out of the cave comes from the tears of a crying woman. As the story goes, a man murdered his wife - who he believed to be unfaithful - in the cave, and she cried so hard that it formed a spring deep in the cave, and the stream from it continues to flow out of the mouth of the cave still today. The spring’s waters are said to have healing properties.



While I was hiking, Wendy did a major exploration of the city of Riga, particularly its old town. She encountered a number of interesting animals perched on top of various “Riga” signs.



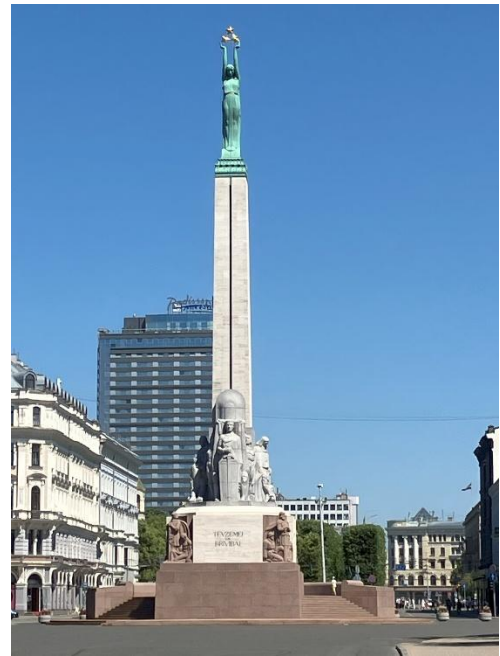


It turns out that they are in celebration of the first ever Latvian film to win an Academy Award. The movie was “Flow” and the animals are characters in the movie. She was also quite impressed by the Cathedral and particularly its incredible organ. She was lucky enough to hear a short concert while there.



And as an engineer, she made note of the intricate gear works that used to turn the hands of the tower clock, before it was modernized.

The picture that follows that is of the freedom memorial. The Latvians, Estonians, and Lithuanians are very adamant about retaining the freedoms that they gained after the fall of the Iron Curtain, and are rather stressed by what they fear will be continued Russian expansionism, should Ukraine fall to defeat in the current confrontation in eastern Europe.



Estonia

Every five years, Estonia has a nationwide folk songfest. Choirs from around the country audition to participate. It is quite an honor to be picked, and those choirs selected practice for an entire year. Then they come together from all across Estonia to the city of Tallin for one huge weekend of music and dancing. There are multiple venues in use, and the city is full of those who come to participate - or even just to watch - many of them dressed in traditional costumes, like those shown here.



When the choirs all came together this year they numbered 32,022 voices and filled the huge elevated stage shown in this picture. It was built just for this once-every-five-years event. When all of those voices come together in song, the effect is incredible.



Unfortunately, our concert was held in pouring rain, but it did not dampen the enthusiasm of either the singers or the crowd. We looked a bit like drowned rats when a photographer took this picture of us, as we tried to stay as dry as we could while listening to the music.



Tallin is a wonderful city and one of our favorite places in Europe. Wandering the streets of its old town leads you to all kinds of shops and places to eat and drink. We enjoyed a lunch at this thoroughly unique inn.



Lithuania

In Klaipeda, Lithuania, we were treated to a concert by a group of a dozen local students, in traditional dress, playing Lithuanian folk music.



Then three of the members came out into the street and drafted about 40 spectators into a dance circle. I stayed out so I could photograph Wendy having great fun participating, as you can see from the smile on her face in the photo that follows. I wish I could share the video, as the leader of the dance broke from the circle and led the line in a crazy, spiraling path that kept

crossing under and through the rest of the circle. I am not sure who was laughing more, the unsuspecting group who were pulled in as dancers, or the rest of us watching them. A great time was had by all.

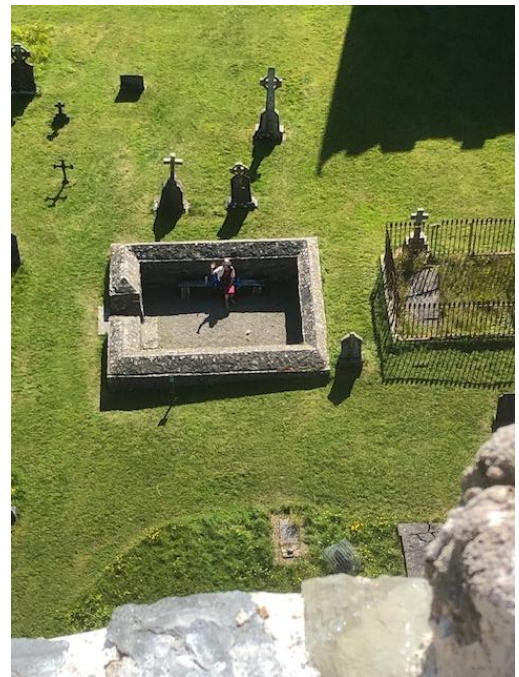


Ireland

We spent a week exploring the area around Dublin in Ireland, visiting a number of iconic sites. The first was the village of Kildare, known as home to Ireland's second patron saint. Everyone knows about St Patrick. But Saint Brigid is equally respected in this part of Ireland, with murals and statues to her all around the village.



And Saint Brigid's Cathedral is home to one of only two Irish Round Towers that still offer the opportunity to climb to the top – which, naturally, I did. Here is a picture of the tower, and a picture of Wendy waving up to me from Saint Brigid's fire pit on the ground. Round towers were a common feature of Irish churches built between 900 and 1200 AD, with estimates of their original numbers running as high as 120 across the island. Round towers served multiple functions in religious and monastic life, including using bells to call monks to prayer, acting as lookout posts, and providing refuge during Viking raids.



I said there were two round towers that you can still climb – the other is at Saint Candice Cathedral in Kilkenny as seen in the following photo – and of course, I climbed it as well. The cathedral also had some truly impressive stained-glass windows and wood carvings. The East Window, shown below the tower photo, was considered a masterpiece of stained glass when it was installed in the 14th century. In 1645, a representative from the Vatican was so impressed with the window, that he tried to purchase it and take it back to Italy. His offer to buy was refused, but he was allowed to make detailed drawings of it. Not long after, the window was

destroyed by the troops of Oliver Cromwell. Years later, fragments were discovered during renovation. And at about the same time, the 400 year old drawings were rediscovered as well. The window was subsequently reconstructed, using the drawings and as much original glass as possible, and remains impressive to this day.



Back in Dublin, Wendy got to mark something off of her bucket list, by drinking a Guinness at Guinness – happy girl.



We also had a round in Ireland's most famous pub, The Temple Bar.



We visited Trinity College to see the famous Book of Kells – photos of which, taken without flash and under subdued lighting to avoid fading - just simply do not do it justice.



And we toured the amazing Irish National Botanical Gardens – and yes, there is another round tower in the background.



Our final Irish stop was the giant chambered cairn at Newgrange. It is so large, that you can see it well in this photo taken from a mile away.



A limited number of people are allowed access inside, and by booking well in advance, we were able to secure tickets to do so. Here you can see the entrance (lower

opening) behind one of the many stones featuring neolithic artwork. The upper opening is aligned perfectly such that at dawn on the winter solstice, the sun's rays travel down that passage and illuminate a specific stone all the way inside the cairn. Pretty impressive combination of astronomy and construction abilities for people living here 5000 years ago.



Spain

We made brief stop in the Basque region of Spain, where we visited a couple of Rioja vineyards and wineries, and learned a lot about the complicated wine making restrictions that vineyards face.



France

We concluded our summer travels in France. Our first stop was Bordeaux, where the one thing that everyone seems to photograph is the Miroir d'Eau, or the mirror

reflecting pool. Part of every hour, it looks just like a giant patio of flat concrete panels. Then suddenly, water starts to bubble up through the center of each panel



And soon it becomes a large pool of water about an inch deep, and suitable for all the children (and some adults) to play. Then it changes yet again, and a mist of fog begins to rise from those holes in the panels and everyone is suddenly standing in an eerie ground fog.



Also of note is the ancient city gate, the only remaining bit of the old city walls.



Next stop in France was Saint Malo, a small, but very interesting walled city.



From the walls you can also view the unique fortifications that were built onto the small islands in the harbor.



And from Saint Malo it is possible to travel to Mont Saint Michel, which is a fortress on a rock in the sea, which originally only had access via walking across a sand bar at low tide (or in a small boat).



Structurally, it is quite impressive, but overall it was a massive disappointment, over-crowded and over-commercialized. There is now a bridge allowing access by bus, or easy 24-hour walking, as opposed to the old sand bar. And that allows for huge crowds to gain access. The next photo shows the main walking street coming to a literal standstill, due to the numbers of people trying to make their way along the narrow

passage. And all of the shops and cafes were obvious tourist traps.



I visited Saint Michael's Mount in Cornwall, just a couple of years ago, and it is similar in construction but still has access via boat or sand bar. I found it quaint as opposed to commercial, and quiet as opposed to crowded. Much more to my liking.

From there we went to Rouen, with many notable sights, such as the Gros-Horloge, or Great Clock, installed in 1389. As well as a beautiful piece of art, the clock is a pretty impressive timepiece. The ball at the top rotates to show the phase of the moon, and the scene at the bottom rotates to show the divinity associated with the days of the week.



There are many intricately carved statues throughout the town.



And the churches are truly impressive. We visited three, starting with Rouen's Notre Dame Cathedral, which is nearly as impressive as the one in Paris, with its combination of early, middle, and late period gothic architecture.



The Church of Saint-Maclou, named after Saint Malo



And Saint Ouen Abbey.



And when in Rouen, one cannot avoid the memorials to Saint Joan of Arc. Here is the chapel built on the spot where she was burned at the stake, and the sword-like cross monument to her memory.



But of all the spots that we visited in France, the one that captured my heart was the small seaside fishing village of Honfleur, with its non-commercialized shops and cafes, where we purchased some amazing French pastries. And after all the Cathedrals and huge churches in the big cities, the place that really drew me, was the simple, wooden fisherman's chapel in Honfleur, with a unique double nave and an altar surrounded by models of sailing ships. Sometimes simple is better, and in this case I felt closer to God than in any of those massive gothic structures that get all the attention in tourist guidebooks.



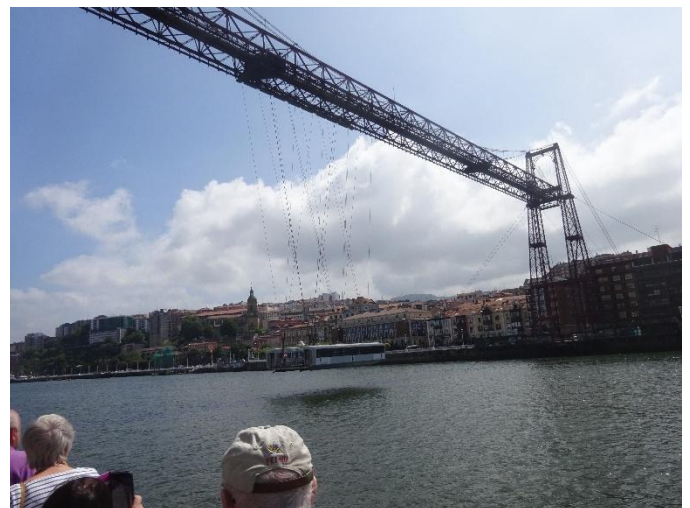
Architecture-wise, the most interesting thing I noticed, on literally all of the large churches and cathedrals, were the dragon gargoyles, used to spout the rainwater away from the sides of the building. We noticed literally hundreds of them in the French cities.



Engineering-wise, the most impressive things on this recent tour of Europe were the bridges. There were a number of large bridges, of a relatively normal style, like this one near Roen.

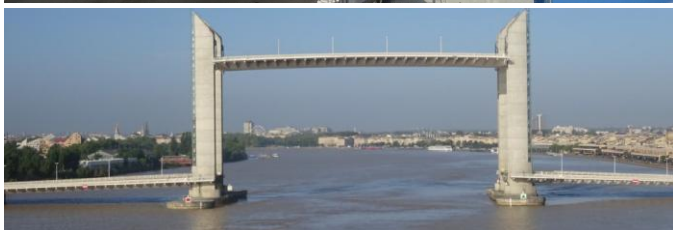
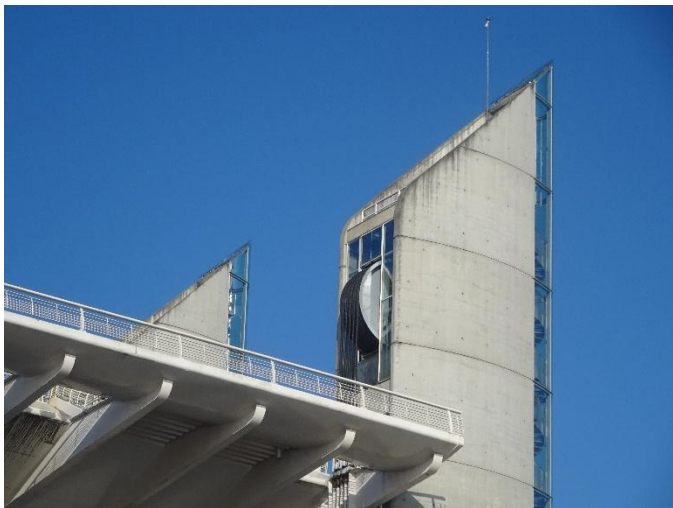


But there was also this “hanging bridge” at Getxo – which frankly, I think of as more of a hanging ferry. The car is suspended by cables from the large steel structure which spans the river. The car runs back and forth across the river every few minutes.



Then there was this vertical lift bridge, in Bordeaux, where motors, turning huge drums at the top of large columns, coil and uncoil incredibly strong cables so as to raise and lower the entire center portion of the bridge – quite an impressive engineering feat.





And then, in Rouen, there is another vertical lift bridge, but this one operates with a completely different set of pulleys and cables.



Well, that pretty much wraps up our explorations for 2025. With my retirement from university work impending in 2026, we are likely to make one last foray into exploring Europe before my contract runs out. Then, it is unclear where we will be spending our time. Maybe back in Indiana. Or, perhaps I will find the perfect retirement cottage in Scotland. I've been looking, but so far, without success.

My Vision:



My Budget:

