

Scotland's Egypt of the North

You can clearly see the most southern of the Orkney Islands out the kitchen window of our house in Caithness. Orkney is a lovely place to visit – which we do nearly every year, at least once. There are 70 individual islands, of which 20 are inhabited – some with very small populations. A number of our visits have been to the smaller of the Orkney islands, and this year we went for a short stay on the island of Rousay, which is known as “The Egypt of the North” because of the huge number of archeological sites on the island. I hope you enjoy hearing a bit about it.

To get to Orkney we first boarded the Hamnavoe ferry out of Scrabster Harbour, just a couple of miles from home. This is a large ship capable of carrying many cars, plus all the large trucks that transport goods to and from the islands.



Interestingly, the harbour is also being used to store the giant blades for the field of off-shore wind turbines being assembled along our coast. You can judge their size by comparing to the house in the background.



Next we drove to the pier at Tingwell, to catch a much smaller ferry that goes between the Orkney Mainland and three smaller isles, including our destination, Rousay.



Rousay is known for its archaeological sites, and the first one that we visited was the neolithic cairn, constructed about 5000 years ago, known as Blackhammer Cairn.



Many cairns involve a crawl, and the one from Blackhammer is shown here.



This one was unique from all the cairns that I have visited in Caithness – consisting of two levels. This

next photo is taken from the top level, looking down into the hole to the lower level.



After that we moved on to the cairn known as Taversoe Tuick, which has a sliding metal door guarding its entrance.



Once inside, things were once again different from what I am used to seeing inside a cairn. In Caithness they tend to be round rooms. But this one had a long-thin chamber divided into compartments by the use of large vertical flat stones.



Next was a similar compartmentalized cairn known as the Knowe of Yarso. In old Scots language, Knowe is a knoll or hill. You can see the dividers between the sections better in this picture.



One more cairn to visit – although there are probably another 25 or 30 unexcavated ones on the island. This one is so large and impressive that after its excavation in the 1930s, the founder of Highland Park Distillery paid to have the building (see the next photo) constructed to protect it.



Inside, the building is pretty impressive – but not as impressive as the cairn it protects. The Midhowe Cairn is the largest I have ever seen – compartmental as seems to be the norm on Rousay – and as can be seen in the photos taken from the overhead walkway.





Subsequent photos show the main entrance to the communal area, then the defensive trench or moat and then outbuildings that would have housed an entire community.



Moving on to “newer” constructions, we visited the iron age (approx. 2500 years ago) Midhowe Broch. All that remains is the ground level structure, but originally brochs were up to 40 feet tall, as shown in the small model in the following photo.



Next is the remains of a large medieval (approx. 1000 years ago) farm known as Skaili Farm. You can see the walls that would have lined the farm or livestock fields, as well as the structures that housed the family and their animals.



Note the seat and storage shelves in this family's abode.



I was left wondering what purpose the holes in these vertical stones were for.



And note the storage shelves in this shed.



And consider the size of the lintel stones between the inner and outer walls.





Skaill also was home to this early 1600s chapel known as St Mary's Kirk (kirk is Scots for church), whose wall facing the eroding coastline required a buttress - 400 years ago.



There were two active archaeological digs going on and both were happy to welcome visitors with a tour and explanation of their work. The first, near Skaill, was of a Victorian era farm, which was built alongside medieval buildings that they used for their livestock, and both were built atop a 800 AD Norse Viking settlement.



The second, at the Knowe of Swandro, was initially thought to be a broch because of its round structure, but has subsequently been found to be a large roundhouse with outlying structures. Many interesting things have been found during the ten years that this dig has been progressing.



The newest archaeological structures on the island are abandoned crofts where families lived in the 1800s.



We stayed at Taversoe, the only hotel on Rousay (4 rooms) which was also the island's only bar and restaurant. After exploring Rousay, we caught the same ferry to the isle of Egilsay (population 26) where we visited the remains of St Magnus' Church, which features a round tower similar to those found frequently in Ireland (and in two places in Scotland) except that it is attached to the chapel, not free-standing.



We also made a quick stop of the even smaller isle of Wyre. There was a lot of nice scenery to be found around the islands, such as this geo (Scots for a narrow cleft in the rock) and the lovely Caribbean appearing beach, where we were visited by a seal.



What would a holiday in Scotland be without standing stones and beautiful views?



Other Miscellaneous Bits and Bobs

I did some further exploring in Dunfermline, which once upon a time, was the most important city in Scotland. King Malcolm Canmore built his tower

fortress there in the 11th century. Remnants of it can still be seen in Pittencrief Park.



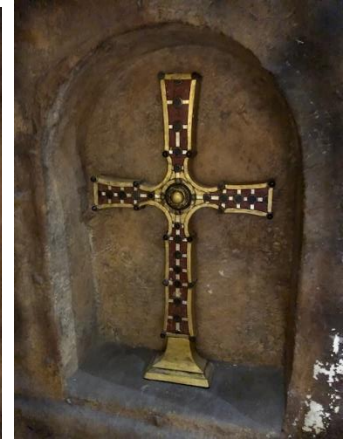
Malcolm's Queen Margaret was instrumental in establishing Dunfermline Abby, ruins of which are shown here.



Margaret eventually became Scotland's only royal saint, and her shrine at the abbey (it rested on the stones shown here) was a site of pilgrimage for centuries.



Legend has it that she used a small cave in the nearby gorge as a place of solitude for her devotions. For centuries, this was also visited by pilgrims. In the early 1960s, the town council decided to fill in the gorge to construct a 250 car parking lot. Filling in the gorge would have buried the cave. There was such an uproar of protest over this plan, that a tunnel, descending 87 steps, was constructed under the parking lot, with a small entrance building at the top.



Also within the park is a natural spring known as Wallace's Well, which supposedly allowed William Wallace to hide in the dense woods, after he avoided capture at the Battle of Falkirk. It is now protected, but water still flows.



This allows visitors today to descend to the level of the original cave, where a shrine is still maintained. Access is limited to a few days each summer, and despite about a dozen trips to Dunfermline, this was the first time I have been able to enter.



I also paid a visit to the lovely Scottish Borders town of Peebles, which features this church, whose tower looks very similar to the famous Wallace Monument in Stirling.



Peebles bridge over the River Tweed was first erected in the 15th century, although it has been improved and revised several times. It has some very interesting lamp posts, in recognition of the life in the river.



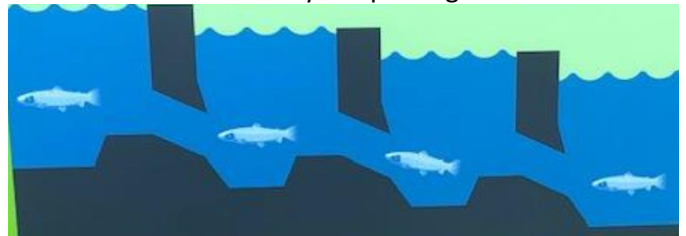
Another stop was at the town of Pithlochy, where the construction of this dam prevented the annual migration of salmon upstream to breed.



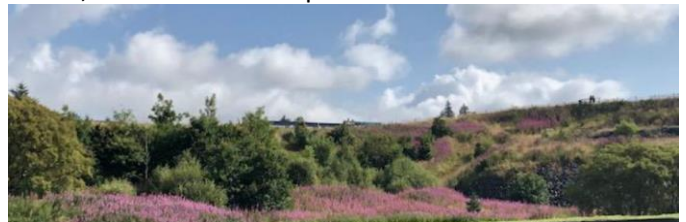
Thus, alongside the dam, they build this fish ladder, to allow the salmon to bypass the dam and get upstream.



Between 200 and 12000 fish make their way upstream each breeding season. I always envisioned the pools being allowed to fill up, so the fish could leap from one level to the next. But that is not how it works. They actually swim through openings at the bottom of each pool. This allows them to make their way through the water that is becalmed by the pooling.



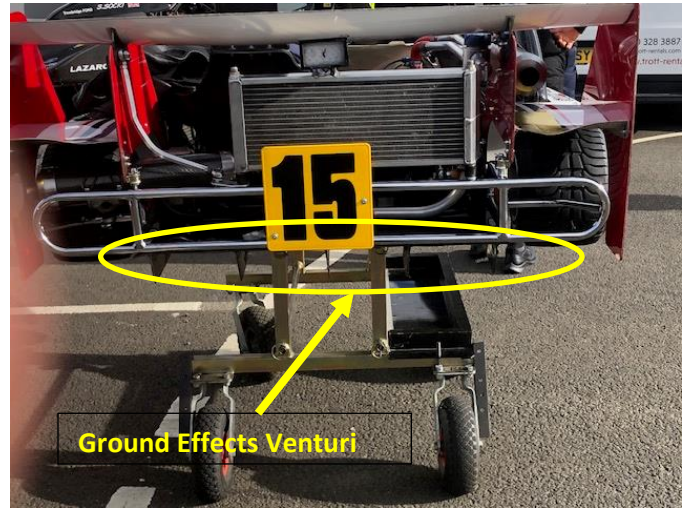
It seems as though purple is the color of Scotland in summer. As can be seen on the hillside below, and in the close up that follows.



St Leonard's church in Dunfermline (still in use) bears a striking resemblance to the ruins of St Magnus Church on Egilsay, with its unique round tower.



And, as regular readers of this will know, the reason that I end up in Dunfermline in the summer is to visit Knockhill Racing Circuit. This summer's trips saw some interestingly different vehicles. Super karts joined the normal sports cars one weekend. These little monsters fly – going nearly as fast as the Formula 4 cars, and with aerodynamics that prove just as impressive.



The Caterham sports cars also visited. These are modern day versions of the famous Lotus 7 sports car built from 1957 into the early 1970s.



And one of the vintage weekends brought out a TVR Vixen, the car that I lusted for all through my high school days.



So much for another summer in Scotland. Maybe I will see some of you in Indiana for Thanksgiving and Christmas.