

Caithness Flag



Scottish Flag

Life at the Edge of the World

One of our friends in England, upon hearing that we were considering moving to Thurso in Caithness, said “That’s the edge of the world.” Well, we are a long way from the big cities and the highly traveled byways. But Thurso is not the edge of the world. However, on a good day, I think you may be able to see it from here.

So, you might ask, just what is there to do at the edge of the world? Well, let me tell you..... for entertainment in the evenings, there are monthly Accordion & Fiddle Club meetings in both Thurso and neighboring Wick. Now, before you scoff, these are great fun. The music is lively and entertaining and the people are friendly and welcoming. It is a good time and an evening well spent.



There are also frequent small concerts by visiting performers, mostly playing wonderful traditional Scottish music on fiddle, guitar, pipes and accordion.

St. Peter’s Operative Masonic Lodge in Thurso meets twice a month in what appears to be an old castle but is actually an old regimental army

headquarters. The John O’ Groats Lodge in Castletown meets twice a month in a renovated church. The third local lodge meets down in Latheron Wheel, about 30 minutes away. Their Tyler carries a sword that was used at the Battle of Waterloo. All three have welcomed me with open arms.



There is a local community theater that performs at The Mill, and they have a play they are performing this month. I have already been solicited by the group of men who build props and scenery.



I have connected with a very active Church of Scotland (closely related to the American Presbyterian church) congregation and there is also a Sunday evening Evensong service at the Episcopal Church (essentially an Anglican congregation, but you can’t call yourself the Church of England and expect anyone in Scotland to attend).



There is always a warm fire going at the Comm Bar just a block away. And at the YNot Pub just 4 blocks away there is good atmosphere, good food, good taps, and good internet. The pavilion is a small, 8 table establishment with good food and a great view of the harbor. So if you don't want to sit home in the evenings and watch the interesting stuff on BBC (much more interesting and intellectual than US television in my humble opinion), there is always someplace to go.

Well, that covers the evenings. But what does one do on a pretty day? And mind you, a pretty day in Caithness is nothing short of incredible.

You could go watch football (soccer to you colonials) as the boys from Caithness, who play for Wick, take on their opponents in the North Highland League. The team's nickname is the Scories. Scorie is a Scot name for a seagull. Trust me, if you live in Caithness, you see a lot of scories. Note the team mascot in the photo below.



Also note that the field (that's "pitch" in Scot's dialect) slopes uphill to the far corner of the second photo. So half the game you are running uphill to score. Could that be a home field advantage? Well it was on the day that I went to watch Wick take on their nearest rivals, as when the home team got to run uphill toward the goal, they came from two goals behind, while a man short due

to a red card, and tied the game against their arch rivals, and the league leaders, the Brora Rangers from just to our south in Sutherland.

Or, you can watch the local rugby team. I never understood rugby in the states, and I still don't. Thank goodness the Scots don't play Cricket. I would NEVER figure it out.



Now shinty – there is a sport that I can get into. Ice hockey is descended from this uniquely Highland sport. Note how similar the sticks are. Except shinty is played on grass and without pads and with a rock-hard ball instead of a puck.



The story goes, that during the clearances, many Scots relocated to Nova Scotia (Latin for New Scotland) in Canada. But the island was too rough and rocky to provide a flat and smooth place large enough to play shinty. That is, until the lakes froze over.....and hockey came into being.

Or you can join everyone in the UK in the pub on the day of the Grand National, a huge steeplechase event held at Aintree. Interestingly, I

visited Aintree last year, but for the time trials held on the remains of the old track on which the original British Grand Prix was held. Note the cars racing by the white fences for the horse circuit.



Or you could go explore the ruins of a castle, like the Castle of Old Wick, below. This is one of the still-standing (sort of) oldest castles in Britain. It was built in the 1160s by Harold, Earl of Caithness. Like many of the early rulers of the north, he was half Norse and half Scots. Caithness, Orkney and Shetland are closer to Scandinavia than they are to London. Thurso and Wick were settled by the Vikings. You see history around every corner.



Or you can go bird watching....especially seabirds on the cliffs.



Or you can walk the beach in Thurso, with a great view of the cliffs of Dunnet Head in the near distance and the islands of Orkney in the far distance.



Prefer water sport ? Try surfing.



You can spend time gardening in your wee yard. In Scotland you never need to worry about having to water your flowers.



You can walk one of the many costal walks past the geos (long narrow steep sided clefts in the

costal cliffs) and stacks (free standing rock outcroppings)



And maybe explore one of the old fishing harbors, examining its abandoned engineering works and old buildings.



You can explore a loch (Scottish for lake).



Or you can go hill walking. Hill walking is a great pastime on sunny days. And walking is easy in Scotland, as the paths have the right-of-way, and landowners cannot close down or block off footpaths.



When on designated paths, you are allowed to cross property lines and fences, often with either a turnstile gate,.....



or a “kissing gate,” so named because the sons and daughters of adjoining property owners could meet at the property line fence and climb to the top of the gate for “social interaction.”



Both types of gates let you cross fences that keep the livestock in the right place. Of course, as you hike, you share the terrain with the natives.



It is spring, so the golden gorse is in bloom on the hillsides.



You pass old steadings and crofters cottages from only a few hundred years ago.



Sometimes you find things you don’t recognize.....like this next photo. Any guesses? It is the first floor of a windmill. The upper story and the blades were wood, so are long gone. Use of wind power has been important in Caithness for a long time. But then we get LOTS of wind up here.



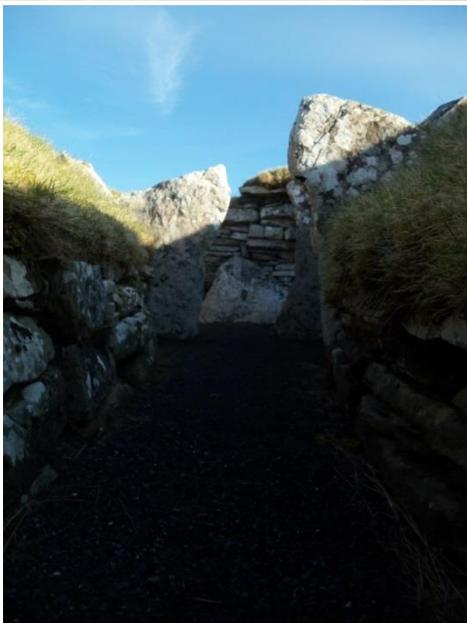
The stones that once made up the roof were taken in the 1700s to build this dam, which still holds back the water today. Note the stone sluice gate.



You might find an ancient burial cairn from Neolithic times, which are 3000-5000 years old. This one, the Cairn O' Get, has been partially excavated and you can see how the opening corridor led to the inner chamber.



And you never know when you might encounter a standing stone, either alone, like the one shown here, or in a circle.



Archeology can be a pastime here, and there are Heritage Centers in Thruso, Wick, Castletown and Dunbeath that are centers for those with this type of interest. One night I attended a presentation

at one of the heritage centers, entitled “Sun, Moon and Ancient Stones.” A gentleman who has spent years examining close to a hundred burial cairns in the Highlands and Islands explained the cairns using a combination of archeology, astronomy and folklore. Most cairns have a circular burial chamber at the center in which were buried bones or entire skeletons. Sometimes they were also stored in cavities or niches built into the walls of the center chamber. The passageway from the outside was usually built about 3 feet tall, such that it could only be entered on one’s knees.

These passageways were almost always aligned such that on a special day/night, the light of the setting sun aligned perfectly with the passageway such that the light would stream directly down the passageway, illuminating the center chamber. His photos showed some astonishing effects as the red-orange glow of the setting sun literally made the inner chamber glow in an eerie orange-ish light.

The most frequent day for this alignment to occur was midwinter sunset (21 December, the winter solstice). However, other special dates, known from Gaelic folklore, were also chosen as the date to align with the sun, such as Beltain (spring fertility festival, in May, halfway between the spring equinox and the summer solstice), Samhain (the end of harvest festival, in October, halfway between the autumn equinox and the winter solstice), and Lughnasa (the beginning of harvest festival, in August, halfway between the summer solstice and autumn equinox).

Perhaps the most amazing is the huge cairn at Maeshowes, on one of the nearby Orkney islands (we can see the southern-most island on a clear day). We have visited Maeshowes before, and the center chamber can hold over two dozen people and the passageway (which aligns at winter solstice) is tall enough to walk down it, merely bent over a wee bit. There are other small channels built through the walls which align to the sunset on the other three special days. This structure was built over 5000 years ago. If you ever come to visit us.....plan to

take the time to go to Orkney and see this structure as well as some of the rings of standing stones.

Speaking of rings of stones, Caithness has a lot of those, also. Our speaker explained that these are usually constructed such that if you stand in the center, there is a stone aligned with the axis of the setting or rising sun on each of those important dates. A few sites, such as the Cairns of Clava, have a ring of standing stones encircling a cairn, so the alignments of all the stones took quite a bit of planning and work.

There are a few standing stone sites in Caithness which are arranged in an array rather than a circle. The most notable of these is not far from us. It has 192 stones arranged in 22 rows and is inventively known as the Hill O’ Many Stones. I visited it one recent sunny day. No one has yet figured out the purpose for these sites or the explanation of the arrangement of these types of arrays.





So, as you can see, there is plenty to do out here at the edge of the world. If you are a moogie (British slang for kitty – and no one seems to know why), then you spend your day moving from window to window, watching Scotland walk by. Floyd, Annie and Othello have arrived and adjusted to their new home rather quickly. My lap is often full to overflowing in the evenings.



We have found that here are many differences in Scots English and American English. And often phrases take on completely different meanings. Among the nearby towns are Skarfskerry, Wick, Mey, Latheron Wheel, Broubster, Lybster, Nibster, Scrabster, Reay, Dounreay and Tongue. A resident of Tongue shows his support for hometown with the following bumper sticker. In America, this might be interpreted differently.



Then there is a hilarious story of a friend of mine, who when a lady visited from the states, asked her if she would like to have him knock on her bedroom door to wake her up in the morning. In a typical British turn of phrase, he asked “Would you like me to knock you up in the morning?” He was a wee bit embarrassed when she explained what that would mean in America.

Ahhhh.....the joys of learning a new language and a new country.

I watched a silent film made in the fifties here in Caithness which had been lost in some archive for all these years. It had recently been rediscovered and set to music with modern musicians and traditional tunes. I have visited castles from centuries ago and Neolithic cairns.....50 years, 500 years, or 5000 years,...Caithness is timeless. Caithness is Caithness.

A man who spoke up after the film said that many people would pay to find the peace, tranquillity, and pace of Caithness. But you can't buy it. You have to find it. And the A9 is a long road north, and most people run out of patience before they get here.

Cheers from the edge of the world..!

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