



Christmas in Caithness and a New Year's Tour of Some of the UK's Smaller Isles

In the run-up to Christmas, we took a trip down to the Scottish Borders to visit with some of our friends in Denholm and attend their annual folk festival. Across 4 days there were several concerts and almost constant sessions going on in all the local pubs. Such wonderful folk music.



While we were there, the locals celebrated Guy Fawkes Day, a.k.a Bonfire Day. It is a day of remembrance of when Fawkes and a handful of associates tried to blow up Parliament and King James in an attempt to put a Catholic king back on the British throne. The public supporters of the king celebrated by lighting huge bonfires, upon which they burned a effigy of the Pope. Today the Pope is no longer involved, but the bonfires are still huge. Here are pictures of the village green in Denholm, by day.....and by night.

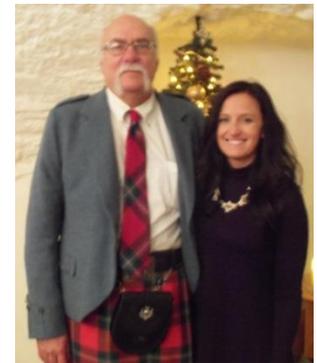


We had to travel to Glasgow to pick up daughter Amanda and her friend Rich, who flew in on Christmas

Eve morning. I got my Christmas present the evening before they arrived, as we went to a REAL hockey game in Braehead by Glasgow. (As opposed to the tape delay games I watch on NHL-TV) The Braehead Clan (and mascot Clahamish the Highland Cow) hosted the Fife Fliers, whose goaltender was Shane Owen, formerly of the Indy Fuel team. I wore a Fuel shirt from when we had season tickets back in Indiana. Shane recognized the logo and gave me a salute.



Next morning we picked up Amanda and Rich at the airport and dashed up to Stirling Castle, where Wendy had booked us for a Christmas Lunch – complete with traditional Christmas Crackers and the obligatory paper crowns – odd British Christmas tradition. Stirling Castle has an incredible great hall, restored as it was in the time of King James. The entire thing is assembled from huge Scottish Oak beams, all assembled with dowels. Not a single nail was used.



While they were with us back home in Caithness, we took Amanda and Rich to see what remains of Sinclair Castle.



And several of the local streams and harbors.



As well as the stacks along the coast.



But the highlight was when we visited my favorite little harbor, and found a large group of seals (including some young pups) laying on the beach.





I have talked several times about visiting the Neolithic chambered burial cairns at Camster. I never was willing to crawl back into the deepest chamber without someone along with me. Fortunately, Rich was game for it, and so we made the long crawl. Here is a photo taken from the inside, looking back out.

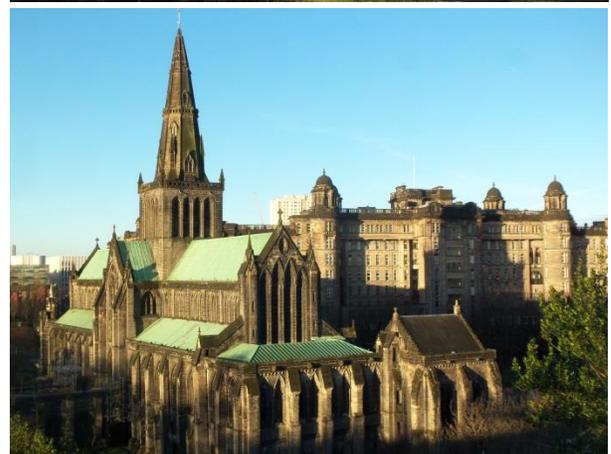


On the return to Glasgow for their flight back to the states, we visited the Necropolis, a

cemetery reputed to be one of the spookiest places on earth to spend the night. Fortunately, we visited in daylight.



For you USA Presbyterians, the structure at the top of the hill (left in photo below) is a very tall monument to John Knox. There is also a great view of the Glasgow Cathedral.



After the kids were on the plane back to Indiana, we visited Berwick, the scene of the massacre of 1296, when Edward Longshanks, King

of England, had his troops butcher every Scot they could find in the town, including women and children. It is believed that over 15,000 people were slaughtered. (Ever wondered why some Scots still harbor a grudge against the English?) Berwick changed hands over a dozen times during the Scottish wars of independence, as the Scot-English border shifted north and south. So it is not surprising that it was heavily fortified, with earthen walls and stone fortifications surrounding the city.



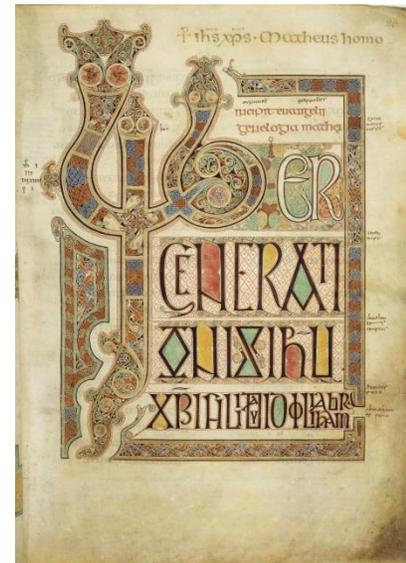
There is also an incredible railway viaduct crossing the river valley that runs alongside the city.



That brought us to the Holy Island of Lindesfarne, the largest of the Farne Islands. It can only be accessed at low tide by a causeway that spends much of the day under water. Here we are crossing it just as the water reached the roadway.



The community on the Holy Island was established by Christian monks, invited to bring their new religion to Northumbria in the year 635. Saint Aiden and Saint Cuthbert both presided over the orders here, and it is the home of the world renowned Lindesfarne Gospels, a highly regarded medieval manuscript (on sheep-skin and using rare pigments from all over Europe and the middle east) of the four Gospels of the Bible transcribed and decorated by a single monk over what is estimated to be at least two years of work. An example of the highly decorative Latin text is shown here.



Parts of the ancient Priory still stand, including the impressive arch that was once over the altar.



This is an ancient baptismal font.



Next to the priory ruins is Saint Mary's Chapel (Church of England) which has ONLY been in use for a few centuries. People have been worshiping Christ on this site for roughly 1400 years.



We attended the evensong service several times and offered prayers for our friends and family back in America.

On a cold and blustery day, we hiked out to the mount where Lindesfarne Castle sits overlooking the North Sea.



I was excited to examine the huge lime kiln workings, which consisted of six ovens, each over ten feet in diameter and 25 feet tall. Here is a view from the top.



And next is a view of the openings below, that permitted access to the bottom of the kiln chambers.



And this is the tunnel complex underground that allowed access to get the quicklime out at the bottom of each oven. The lime was used as a stabilizer in mortar and plaster and also in agriculture to adjust the pH of the soil.



We had one day of low wind while at the Holy Island, so we used it to take a wee boat tour out to the rest of the Farne Islands (there are 14 at high tide, and 28 at low tide).



There are millions of seabirds on the Farne Isles in the summer, but only a few Cormorants, Shags, Gulls and Oystercatchers remain in winter.



But the seals give birth to pups in fall, so there are several thousand Gray Seals in the Farne Islands this time of year.



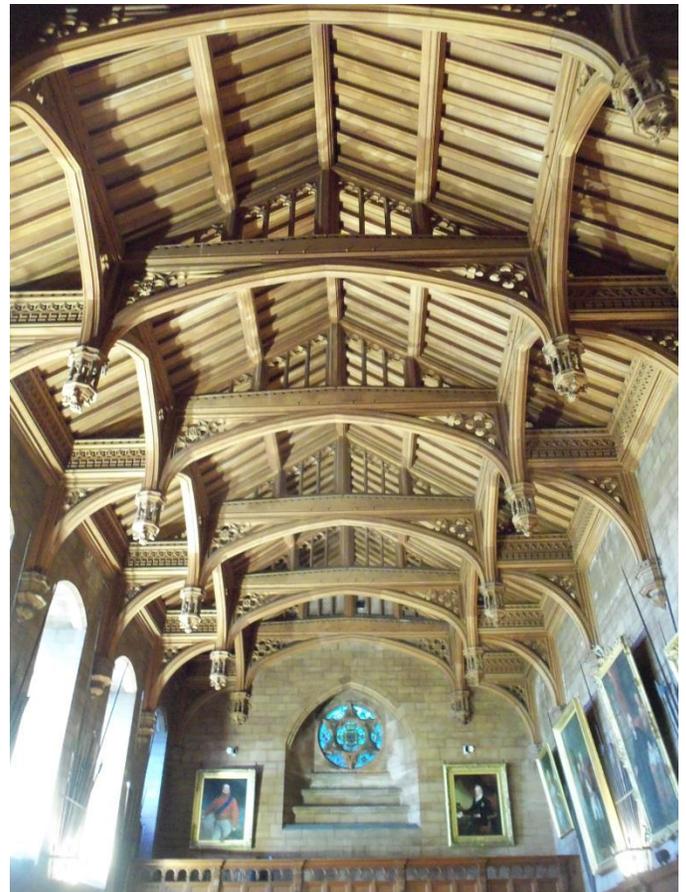
The rocks can be quite treacherous for ships. So the islands have been guarded by lighthouses for centuries. The one shown here on the left is fully automated and solar powered. The one on the right is from the 1500s, when a bonfire would be lit atop that square tower to warn the ships away from the rocks.



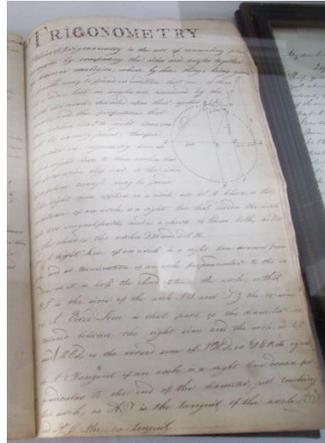
Before heading home to Caithness, we stopped in at Bamburgh Castle, one of the finest intact examples in the UK.



The ceiling in the great hall was amazing.



Here is a Victorian era vacuum cleaner and a maths book on Trigonometry from the same period.



Cannon, large and small, on the ramparts.



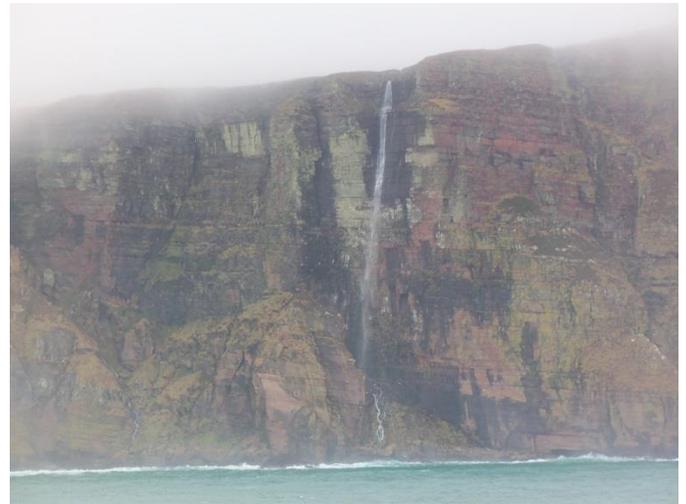
We returned home to a rare Caithness winter storm that made us feel like we were back in Indiana.



Then soon after, I had to visit two schools on the northern islands of Orkney who want to compete in the Bloodhound Challenge this year, joining the schools from Caithness and Sutherland that participated last year. Here are the cliffs of the Island of Hoy as we sail past.



A waterfall off the cliffs of Hoy.



The Old Man of Hoy is a sea stack that stands watch over those approaching Orkney.



This Gray Seal sunning on a rock makes it easy to understand how sailors of old mistook them for mermaids – especially after too long at sea and

after too much highland brew. They are called selkies here in the north, and the tales say they can change from seal to beautiful woman for the right man. But if they choose to keep the man, they take him back under the sea to their home. The tale explains men lost at sea, or “gone to the selkies.”



The Standing Stones of Stenness were eerily shrouded in fog as I went past.



I had to take 5 different ferries between the isles of Orkney to reach my various destinations, passing many a wee rock in the archipelago.



The island of Sanday has less than 500 inhabitants, and only 58 students in their entire school. I encountered a new neolithic feature – a burnt mound, of which there are over 20 on the wee island. This one has been excavated. These were built either at a well (the hole on the left) or near a stream for a water source. Water was drawn to fill the central pit, and stones were heated in a fire in the oven (in the back of this photo). The stones were then thrown into the water pit to produce

steam. With a wooden domed roof over the top, this would have become a sauna. Archeologists know this was the process because remains of burnt wood and stone bits obviously broken by thermal shock (i.e. straight from fire to water) are found in the mounds. Many think this may have been a ritual purification act, similar to the sweat huts that American Indians built. Or, they may have just been used to warm those who had been out working or fishing in the extreme cold and wind of the northern islands.



The island of Stronsay was next. It has 350 residents and a school of 38 pupils. The island has protected cliff inlets (called geos here) where many gulls nest all winter, protected from the harsh winds.



Next is a photo of the Vat of Kirbister on Stronsay. It is nearly a geo, but an arch still remains at the sea end, making the Vat seem like a small pool unto itself. The opening is big enough

that a small boat could make it in to find shelter in a really bad storm.



Perhaps Stronsay's most interesting piece of history dates from 1808, when two fisherman saw a large carcass lying on the rocks offshore. When they managed to get to it, they reported that it had a long neck and tail, and six legs. The sketches they made are available on the internet (see Stronsay beast or sea monster) and are shown here.



More islanders came to see it, and it was measured at an astounding 55 feet long, with rough gray skin. Reports spread quickly via the Orcadian newspaper (still in publication today) and within months the Natural History Society in Edinburgh had classified the creature as a new species, with the Latin name *Halsydrus Pontoppidani*. The name, meaning Pontoppidan's Water Snake of the Sea, was chosen in honor of the 18th century Norwegian bishop, who collected reports of sea-monsters. Remains of the beast were destroyed in a museum archive fire, more than a century ago, long before DNA testing was possible. So today, folks are divided between those who think that the Stronsay Beast was a rare distant cousin to Nessie, and those who think that it was the remains of a basking

shark. Mind you, the largest basking shark ever recorded was significantly shorter than the beast's measured 55 foot length. So..... believe what you choose.

As the sun sets on 2016, we wish you all a Happy New Year from the most beautiful place on earth.



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

