



Highland Archeological Festival



Autumn is time for the annual Highlands Archeological Festival. The opening weekend, I joined a group from the Dunbeath Heritage Centre for a hike to the Wag of Forse. The path getting there was full of interesting stuff.

This is a 3 bay settling tank for water purification, build in the 1800s. A small amount of water from the stream is allowed to flow into the first tank, where sediment settles to the bottom. As the tank fills, the water at the top overflows into the second tank, where it again fills slowly and allows sediment to settle. When it fills, the water at the top flows into yet a third tank which fills even more slowly, again allowing anything in it to settle. The overflow off the top runs through a pipe system and supplies the nearby farm.....and it is still in use today.



This wide spot in this stream can be closed off by closing a section of the dam with a wooden gate. The pond fills up and the sheep are herded through it to wash them before shearing



The property is divided by these stone dikes, or walls. This one has an interesting story. In Scotland a woman has always been able to inherit land (unlike in England where for centuries they could not). In the 1300s the Forse Estate was divided up amongst the children. The youngest daughter was told she could have the land that she could cover in one direction until she got off her horse. The wee lass got on her pony rode to here, before an adder spooked her pony and she was thrown off. The dike marking her property line was built there and still stands.....so the story goes



This is Ushilly Brock, which is collapsed and unexcavated. From standing atop it, you can see four other iron-age brochs. Each was a village within a single stone structure. So this valley was a very popular place to live 5000 years ago.



This was a bronze-age hut circle, which had a circular stone foundation (see orange on photo) and a wood and thatch roof. There were dozens of

these along our way. These are even older than the brochs.



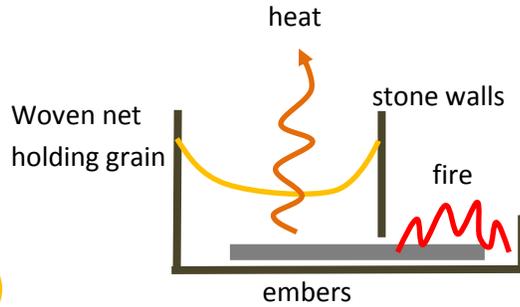
This was a Norse/Viking long house from a more recent - but still long ago – time, only a thousand years ago or thereabouts. There were several of these along the way, indicating that the valley was a popular place to live for a looong time.



Near this long house was a grain drying kiln.



Which worked like this:



This is our group approaching a burnt mound.



Burnt mounds are literally piles of burnt stones. They can be found all over Caithness and Orkney. Stones were heated in a fire and tossed into a stone trough filled with water. This created steam. The stones often shattered into smaller bits by the temperature change going from fire to water, and - after cooling - were tossed into a mound outside. Some believe that this steam was used for cooking. However, another idea is that they may have created a type of steam sauna for purification of the spirit. This must have been a big one, as there are two mounds of burnt stones on either side of the remains of the structure where the fire/water/steam were.



The main attraction for the day was the massive ruined stone village known as the Wag of Forse. It is so big that it stands out on the hillside when still a half hour walk away.



The site is jam packed with the remains of stone rooms and passageways.

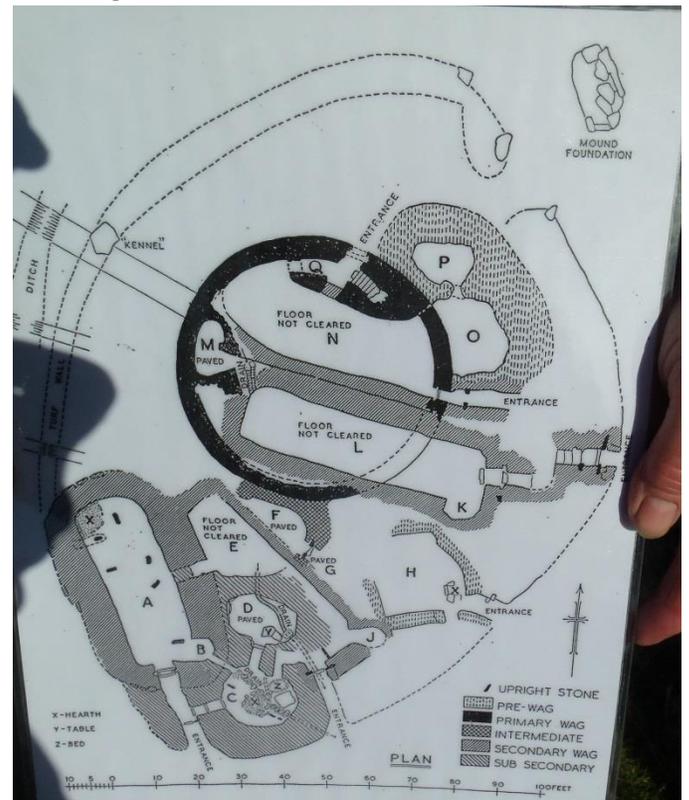


A wag is an archeological term (derived from the Gaelic word for cave) for a galleried rectangular stone building. Here you can see how part of the structure meets that description, and the large stones that formed the gallery and supports

still remain, with one supported gallery stone still in place.



This was the first part of the site excavated, which is why the site became known as the Wag of Forse. However, as the work went on, it was actually a round broch structure that dominates the site. This excavation map gives an impression of how large the site is.



Brochs were circular stone structures that often grew to as tall as 40 feet tall, with multiple floors in the main structure, and numerous adjacent structures built alongside the tower as the village grew. The tower walls were double walls, with

small storage spaces and stairways to the upper floors in between the two walls.

Entrances are often still in place due to the weight of the lintel stones



Stairs between the walls of the broch.



Lots of storage shelves and spaces in the walls of the individual family living quarters.



The day also included examination of a runrig, or ridge and furrow, field system which Neolithic farmers used to divide field plots and aid in drainage. We also heard the tale of the secret WW2 bunker built into a Forse Estate hillside

during the period when a German invasion of Britain was a real possibility. So food and ammunition was hidden away in case the invasion happened, and the locals had to begin a resistance against the German invaders. Fortunately it never came to that. But I certainly have faith that the highland spirit that we find up here in the far north, would have ensured that the invaders would have found it tough to rule this land.

My second hike of the Archeological Festival was with the Clyne Heritage Association, along the Old Coffin Road, 3.5 miles long, which connected the village of Strathbrora to the Clyne Parish Church, built in 1775. It has one of only three free-standing bell towers in Scotland.



The path was used every Sunday by the villagers to get to church. And when anyone in Stratbrora died, the coffin had to be carried the 3.5 miles to the church and cemetery...hence the name the Old Coffin Road . It is a pretty rugged cross-

country track. At a few points, large flat stones, like this one, were used as “coffin stones”, upon which the deceased was left to rest, while the funeral party stopped for a wee dram.



Along the way we found two survey “benchmarks,” which are rocks upon which a survey mark was carved in the 1870s.



These survey marks could be tied to the ordnance map, which would list the longitude, latitude and elevation of the marks. Even though they date to the 1870s, they are accurate enough that surveyors still used them as baselines today.

Next is a photo of our hiking party stopping at the ruins of Killin Broch, another iron age dwelling, this one completely collapsed. There is something truly strange about sitting on the rocks of a 5000 year old broch to have your lunch, listening to the roar of the rutting stags on the other side of the hill, and having your cell phone ring.



This standing stone overlooks Loch Killin. You can tell a standing stone erected by the prehistoric residents from a stone which merely happens to be in a standing position naturally, by the smaller stones which are used to create its foundation, or setting.



Across the Highlands there are a number of archeological features known as “cupped stones.” These are stones into which Neolithic residents of these hills used smaller stones to grind or bore cupped holes in large rocks. No one is quite sure why they did this. Some believe it was a prehistoric form of art, some assume it must have had spiritual meaning. Who knows, maybe they were just bored and took to shaping rocks the way my grandfather whittled sticks into various shapes. Lest you be tempted to think that these are natural indentations in the rock, let me assure you that if you run your finger in the cup, it feels smoother, as if it had once had a grinding surface applied to it.....which I

guess it had....a few thousand years ago. Our group visited one of these cupped stones, and you can tell the cups because our leader has placed blue marbles in them for this picture.



Here is our tour leader atop the wall of a clearance-era sheep pen.



I showed the remains of a hut circle earlier. They are usually nearly impossible to see as centuries of heather and bracken have overgrown them. However, this one was caught in a range fire that burnt away the growth, and then after the growth was dead, heavy rains washed away the loose dirt, leaving a much more visible stone wall that formed the base of a bronze age hut. Peat would have been piled on top of this, then timbers used to build a frame, much like an American Indian teepee. Thatch would have been laid on the frame to create the roof.



I hiked to the ruins of Forse Castle one day.



It overlooks a rocky geo.



You may recall that I talked about my team of girls from Tain Royal Academy that won the Scottish Championship in the Bloodhound competition, designing the winning scale rocket car and beating all the teams of boys from around the country. We earned the chance to go to see the

actual Bloodhound rocket car run at Newquay Air Field in Cornwall. I flew to London and then drove across Wiltshire and Devon to get there. At one point, traffic on the highway ground to a halt. As we inched along, I realized that the problems was a gaper's block, of cars stopped to look at Stonehenge. Talk about a juxtaposition of the centuries.



I also visited a lesser known set of standing stones known as the nine maidens. Although not all the stones remain standing today, you can still find how they were lined up in a row across a field. They bear their name from a more recent time, a mere few centuries ago, when legend says they were nine lasses who were turned to stone for dancing on the Sabbath.



Of course back in Caithness, we have our own collections of standing stones, stone circles, and the unique stone array, known as the Hill O' Many Stones.



And you stumble across a cairn everytime you turn around in Caithness.....some you can crawl into like this one at Camster.



Often our hillsides are covered with bronze age and iron age remnants. And frequently a small hill turns out to be an overgrown broch or cairn. As oine of my hiking companions said...."In Caithness, a hill is never just a hill,"

And finally.....we may live in a small town in the furthest northern reaches of the Scottish Highlands.....but our town's Christmas lights will out-shine any of your big-city stuff back in the USA.....Can you say Aurora Borealis ? This photo was taken from Thurso beach, facing north at full dark one night last week.



Merry Christmas and Happy New Year from Scotland. Wendy and I will be back in Indiana for the holiday period, so maybe we will see a few of you.

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