



We're staying in Scotland !



The good news is: our visas have been renewed, so we have another 3 years of living in Scotland!!!!!!

The kids all came over for the Christmas holidays. So we felt that we had to give them a unique Scottish experience. Like visiting (and hand feeding) a herd of reindeer on a Cairngorm mountaintop on the afternoon of Christmas Eve.



Here is Vicky with her new friend, then Aeron with one sneaking up behind her, Amanda using a handful of food to make friends, and Wendy enjoying it all. By the way, full-grown reindeer are much smaller than we all imagined. They barely come up to your waist. Amazing that the wee beasties can pull that big heavy sleigh all over the world on Christmas Eve.



But wait, there's more. After Christmas we went for a day of falconry and all the kids had a go at flying a bird of prey. Here are Aeron and Tim.



Here are Amanda and Rich, and finally Vicky.



The large bird is a Harris Hawk named Mr. Bojangles and the smaller one is a Boobook Owl named Bandit. We also visited Elgin Cathedral, which despite being a ruin, has some remarkably intricate surviving stone carving.





That is Scotland's patron saint, St. Andrews, in the center carving below.



We also visited Amanda's personal castle.



And we stopped at a truly brilliant Thomas Telford bridge at Craigellachie. It is the oldest surviving of Telford's pre-fabricated lattice cast iron bridges. Telford's bridges, churches and canals are all over Scotland and are remarkable works of engineering and artistry for their time.



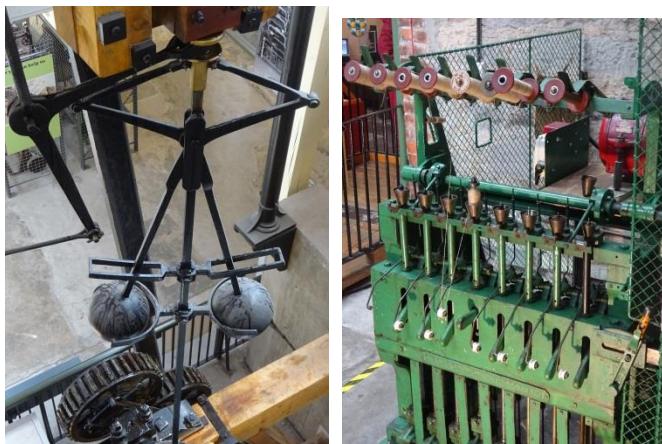
We also saw Caithness' own Christmas seals. They come ashore on our beaches to give birth every November, so at Christmas, we have quite a collection of them each year.



We did not get the extreme cold and snow that Indiana got, but we still had our share. But ours falls more as sleet, rather than snow. And it can build up on even the clothes line wires as seen in this next photo. Our Snowdrops bloomed this year – one of the joys of Scotland in winter.



We went to Dundee for the first time, visiting three historic attractions there. First was the Verdant Jute Mill. Dundee once had over 120 jute mills, processing jute from India and spinning it into thread used to make everything from burlap for bags to rope for sailing ships. The mill was originally powered by a huge Boulton-Watt steam engine, shown in the photo here, followed by photos of the James Watt designed centrifugal speed governor and then one of the many jute mill machines, all of which were powered off of a system of pulleys and belts driven from a long shaft which ran through the rafters from the steam engine for the entire length of the building. This process was similar to the bobbin mill that I visited in Cumbria a couple of years ago, also driven from a steam engine driving a similar long shaft with associated pulleys, belts and machines. I acquired a bobbin that I watched made on that day, and this trip I acquired a handful of processed jute fiber. I plan to spin it using one of Wendy's yarn tools, and then wind it on my bobbin, just like the mills would have done.



We also visited two historic sailing ships, both built in Dundee. The first was HMS Discovery, the ship

that Robert Scott used in his famous Antarctic Scientific Expedition. The ship was locked in the Antarctic ice floes for two years. It is amazing to study how the crew lived and worked aboard this ship for all that time, gathering incredible amounts of scientific information. It is equally amazing to consider that the hull of the ship was able to take the pressures of being trapped in the ice that long. The huge timbers used to construct the double-hull are huge, as shown here.



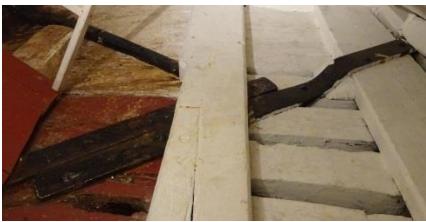
The second ship was the HMS Unicorn, a sailing frigate commissioned for use in the Napoleonic Wars, and launched in 1824. It is the 5th oldest ship still afloat in the entire world. By the time Unicorn launched, Napoleon had been defeated, and therefore the ship was never used in battle. In fact, the masts were never installed and a roof was built over the main deck, making it one of the oddest looking ships ever.



Although armed with 28 eighteen pound long guns on the gun deck and 14 thirty-two pound cannonades on the upperdeck, she never went into battle. In fact she never sailed. But she did float, and was used as an ordinance ship, holding stores like a floating warehouse.



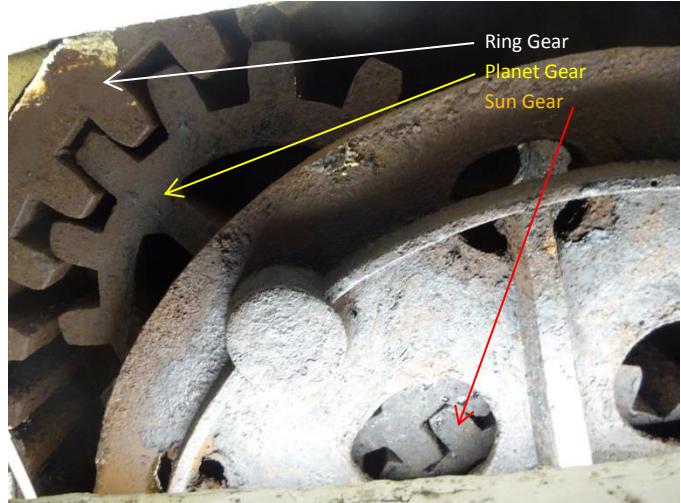
The ship was one of the first built using steel brackets and braces to strengthen the wooden timbers of the hull, as the black metal members show here.



As an engineer, I was impressed by how the huge anchors were raised. The method of that era was to have a capstan on each deck, like the ones shown here on the main deck and gun deck. Sailors would stick short beams into those holes and push against them to turn the capstan and in turn draw in the anchor chain. Unicorn was one of the first ships to use a gear system to gain mechanical advantage, so as to require less men to push on the capstan.



Here the internal workings of the epicyclic (planetary) gearbox can be seen. Being geeky engineers, Wendy and I got overly excited trying to get into the gearbox for a closer look



As if Unicorn did not have enough other interesting claims to fame, in World War 2 it was anchored along the wharf in Dundee and used as a naval office headquarters. In the final year of the war, a German submarine, U2326, sailed into Dundee harbor under a white flag and the crew surrendered to the officers aboard the Unicorn. Thus, a sailing frigate from 1824 accepted the surrender of a WW2 submarine in 1939, 115 years after it launched.

Meanwhile, closer to home, there has been an extensive project for the past year to upgrade the John O'Groats trail along our coast. This spring the trail ranger led several day hikes along the trail, and I went on most of them. Here are some of the highlights.

A two century old hilltop signal tower in which a huge bonfire would have been built to warn ships away from the rocks. And some waterfalls.



Including this waterfall at Whaligoe where the wind was blowing so hard that the water from the waterfall was blowing UPWARDS as a cloud of mist.



The beautiful Caithness coastline.



Ceann Hilligeo – Headland of the Holy Inlet.



The next photo is Clyth Harbour – with the old harbour house built into the cliff, just a short stroll from the waterfall. Then the Forse Castle ruins above the remains of a herring fishing harbour, followed by Sinclair Castle and Ackergill Tower.



There were some noteworthy structures along the trail. Like this bridge at Latheronwheel harbour, or this public well from 1866 at Staxigoe harbour.



World War 2 Bunkers.



A whale bone arch.



According to local legend, around 1420, Helen of Braemore was betrothed to Alexander Gunn. The chief of the Keith clan from nearby Ackergill wanted her for himself, and kidnapped her on the eve of the wedding. In the ensuing battle, Alexander was one of those slain by the Keaths. Distraught by her kidnapping and the death of her betrothed, Helen threw herself from Ackergill Tower (nowadays a B&B), into the sea. Supposedly her ghost still haunts the tower, and the gate leading from the tower gardens to the sea is still called Helen's Gate.

Subsequent conflicts between the two clans continued after this for two decades until 1464, when it was decided that a battle of champions would be fought between twelve men on horseback from either clan. It was to take place near the site of St. Tears Chapel. On

the day, the Keaths arrived with two men on each horse, thus outnumbering the Gunns 2 to 1. It was a massacre, with all of the Gunns slaughtered on a day in which the sanctity of the chapel was violated, and its walls ran red with blood. Grudges in the Highlands can last a long time. It was not until the clans finally signed a treaty in 1978, that the feud ended after more than 500 years. Helen's Gate and the monument at the site of St. Tears Chapel are shown here. The JOG trail passes both.



One of the things seen along the trail is this statue of Henry Sinclair.



He is of the lineage of the St.Clair/Sinclair clan. The northern arm of the family was based near where we live in Scotland, and Sinclair Castle, is also along the trail. There are several interesting things about old Henry. Many historians are convinced that North America was discovered by the Norse, long before Columbus sailed that direction. There is evidence to indicate that Norse sailors landed in Greenland and along the Canadian coast as far south as Nova Scotia, just after 1400. Now here is the interesting bit, during the late 1300s and early 1400s, when Henry represented the northern Sinclair clan, he was also Earl of Orkney – and in those days the Orkney Islands still belonged to Norway. Local legend says that it was Henry Sinclair, who led the expedition, on behalf of the King of Norway (to whom he was related on his maternal side). And that he landed in Greenland, becoming the first European to set foot in North America. This theory is supported by carvings, among the many plants and flowers in the stonework of Rosslyn Chapel, which look distinctly like North American plants that do not grow in Europe. The

chapel was built by Henry's grandson William, in 1486. Columbus, you recall, did not sail west until 1492. Perhaps right here in Caithness, not far from where I live, is the source of the first journey to the new world.

Along the JoG trail, we saw quite a bit of wildlife: Fulmers, Herring Gulls, Common Gulls, Blackback Gulls, Shag, Snipe, Oyster Catcher, Raven, Kerlew, Buzzard, Kestrel, Black Guillemot, Cormorant, Razorbills, Jackdaw, Roe Deer and Seals. And we passed the largest Horse Mussel beds in the world.



Here are some of my hiking companions. Note the hiking kilt (in February) and the Harris Tweed hiking pants.



In January, we were quite honored that my lodge asked me to present the toast to the lassies and Wendy to present the reply and toast to the lads at our Burns Night dinner. I guess they have forgiven us for that wee disagreement back in 1776, and have accepted us two colonials into their community.

Although living this far north, and looong ways from any big cities is sometimes challenging, life here is good and people are incredibly friendly. We are pleased that our visas were renewed and that we get another three years here.

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