

Searching Scotland for Fairies, Witches, Hermits and Romans

With Wendy back in Indiana for the arrival of a granddaughter, I have been left on my own in Scotland. So naturally, I've gone exploring.

I started a search for Scottish fairies, beginning with the Fairy Trail near the wee village of Latheronwheel. As you wander back into the woods, if you look verrrry carefully, you can catch a glimpse of some of their homes.



Certain that I was on the right path, I used a long stick to gently tap on one of the doors.



After a moment, the wee door creaked open and a rather old and disgruntled fairy poked his head out, and rather grumpily asked: "What e want, bothering one? Can't one catch a rest wi'oot some gangly tall one making a racket on one's door? It is nap time, danot ye ken?"

Naturally, I apologized, and explained that I was only curious to see if these were real fairy dwellings, or just some gimmicks put up by locals to appease the silly tourists.

"One's every bit as real as ye believe one ta be," he replied. I apologized again for breaking his nap, but asked if I could get a picture of him before he went back

to his repose. He dashed back in and slammed the door behind him, explaining through the keyhole that his kind believed that they would be sucked into the little black box in my hand if I pointed it at him. So, I put my camera back in my pocket and wished him a good day before I followed the path back out of the woods.

My next foray into the land of fairy took me deep into the woods of the Black Isle (which is neither black, nor an island – but a rather green peninsula that sticks out into the Moray Firth). I had heard tell of a Fairy Glen in those woods, and it certainly seemed likely as I followed along a babbling stream back into the woods.



Eventually I came to a peaceful glen that opened up onto a waterfall. I approached most quietly, and sure enough, bathing in the pool at the bottom of the falls were a trio of fairies. Remembering the admonition of the grumpy old fairy back at Latheronwheel, I did not take my camera out of my pocket. So, you will just have to take my word for it. You trust me, don't you?



While on the Black Isle, I also stopped to look at the ruins of Fortrose Cathedral, founded as a chapel in the 7th century by Saint Curadan, and turned into a cathedral in the 13th century. Mary Queen of Scots stayed here in 1564. The newer portion of the structure

was stripped by Cromwell during the British civil war, so that the stones could be used in nearby Inverness. Only the structures shown in my photos remain, although I've included an artist's rendering of what it probably looked like.



I also took this shot of the War Remembrance Memorial in front of the local church.



Britain is famous for its witch trials of the 1600s. Perhaps the best known are the Pendle witch trials in Lancashire, which we became very familiar with during my year at the University of Lancaster. By the way – I highly recommend a historical novel entitled “The Familiars” by Stacey Halls, based on facts from that era.

Well, there were also witch trials in the village of Crook of Devon, near where I go for sports car races every summer at Knockhill. So, on a recent trip, I stopped in at the remains of Castle Tullibole where there is a witch's maze, dedicated to the memory of 11 women executed in 1662 as witches under Scotland's Witchcraft Act. At the center of the maze is a monument bearing all of their names.



There are few remains of the castle, but the old cemetery can be found, and contains some pretty spooky looking stones from the 1600s and 1700s. And hidden in some trees is a tall monument to James Wellwood, Baronet of Moncreiff, a minister and occasional politician of the area.

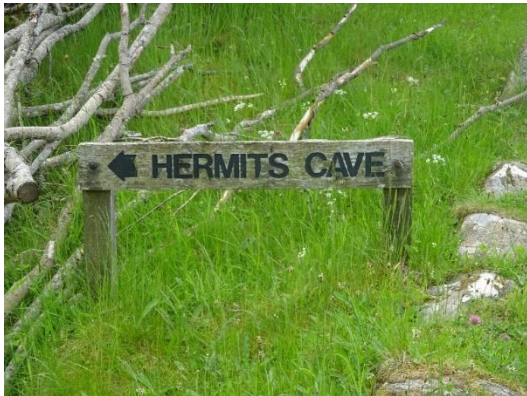


Scotland was once known for its ascetic hermits, who would seek solitude in the wilderness, where they would contemplate the meaning of life – the mysteries of the universe – or at least get the hell away from annoying neighbors. There are a number of places in Scotland still known as a “hermitage” – a place

where one could get away from the worldly life and commune with nature for contemplation and meditation. I have recently visited two of these. The first is found well back into the woods north of Perth and after a bit of a stroll along a creek, you come to what is known as Ossian's Hall or "The Hermitage." When you enter the stone folly, you understand why the site was originally selected, an estimated 250 years ago, because the rear overlooks the rather impressive Falls of Braan.



The second is known as The Hermit's Cave, and it also has a back door that overlooks a waterfall – this time the taller, but less voluminous Falls of Acharn,



The Romans did not venture far into Scotland – well, except for the infamous 9th Legion – often referred to as "The Lost Legion", which allegedly went north into Scotland to subdue the Scotia and Pictish tribes – and never returned. That is the reason that Hadrian's Wall and the Antonine Wall were constructed by the Romans – to keep those pesky barbarian Scots in the uncivilized north. So, to explore for Romans, I went south across the border to Chester, which was known as Deva Vitrix in its Roman days, and was their second largest city in Britain, after Londonium. It is the only city in Britain that still has its continuous walls around the old town. And a walk around them is a must.



Remarkably, the shrine to Minerva, the Roman goddess of wisdom, is still intact, and the nearly 2000 year old carving of her standing by an altar, with an owl (symbol of wisdom) perched on her shoulder is still faintly visible. As you can see, it had a lintel constructed over it, which has protected it somewhat from the centuries of weathering.



You can also visit the excavation of the Roman amphitheater (largest in Britain), where the famous Roman Games would have taken place.



I made a new friend, Gaius Marcelus Vitorius, who was training new recruits for the Legion.



Gaius offered to take me to see a roman ruin that very few tourists find. It was the excavated remnants of one of the columns of the ancient basilica, located in the cellar of the local Pret A Manger sandwich shop. I guess the Romans loved a good pastrami sandwich.

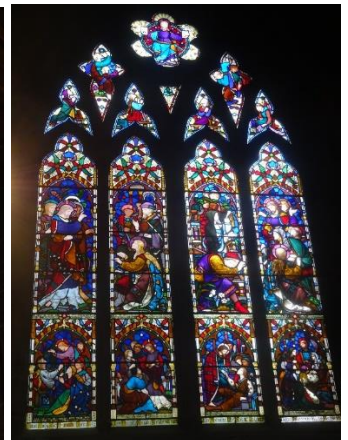
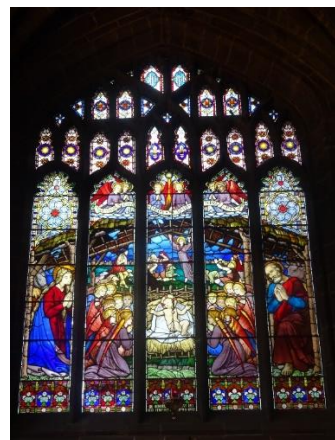
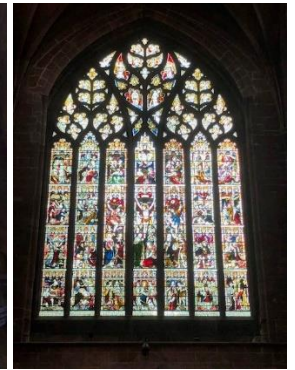
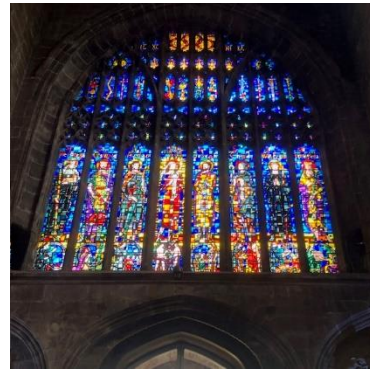
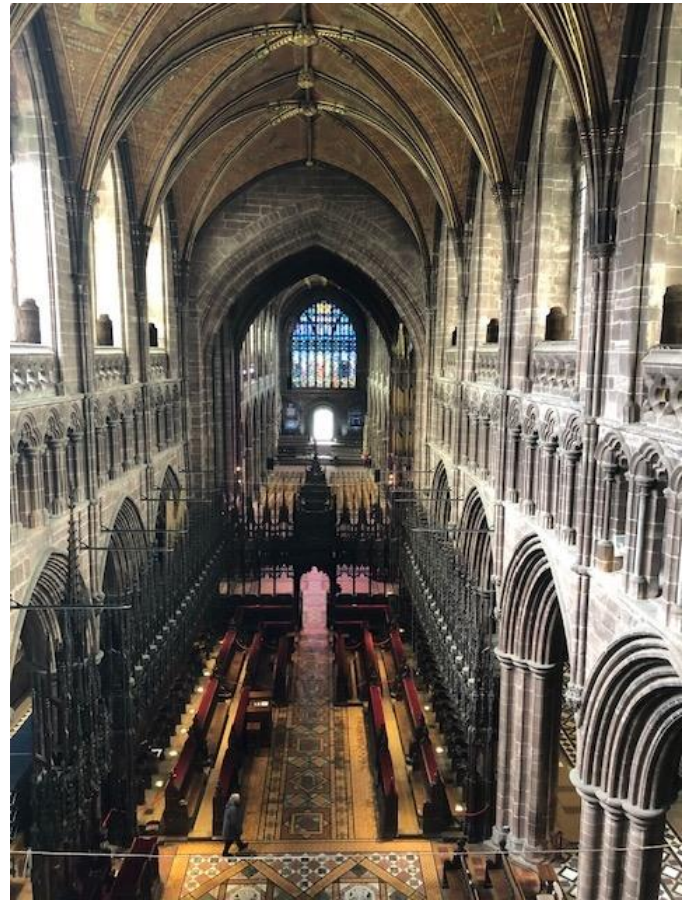


Chester's old town, inside the walls, is really lovely, full of old buildings, shops, cafes and pubs. I frequented one, known as Telford's Warehouse, dedicated to the famous civil engineer, Thomas Telford. The centerpiece of the pub is the gearbox workings of one of his lift bridges.



I took a tour of the historic Chester Cathedral, including a one-person guided tour all the way to the top of the bell tower. Only one of the bells remains, as the rest were removed because of their massive weight, which was weakening the ancient walls of the tower. Interestingly the remaining bell was the nine o'clock bell, which was historically rung at quarter-to-nine each evening to alert everyone that the city gates would close in a quarter hour. By that time, all Chester citizens needed to be back within the walls, and all Welshmen, needed to be outside. No Welsh were allowed in the city overnight. I am told that this law is still on the books, although no longer enforced. Wales is so close that you can see it from the bell tower.

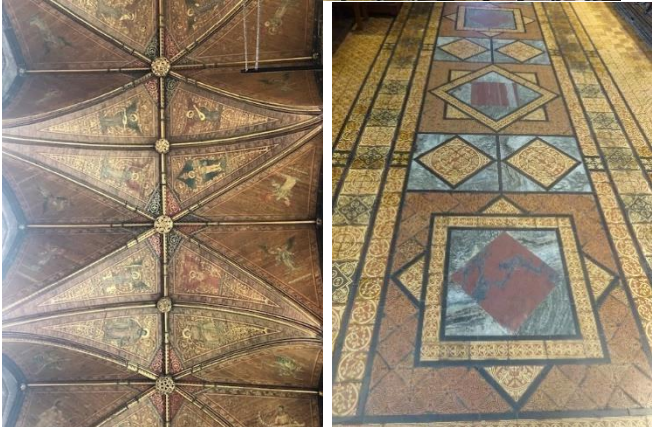
The Cathedral has some amazing stained glass windows, and very impressive mosaic work on both floor and ceiling, as can be seen in the subsequent pictures. And the wood carving in the choir chamber is unbelievable (last cathedral photo). A wonderful place to attend the nightly evensong service.



My final Chester photo is of the races, held on the oldest still operating horse track in the world. The photo was taken from the Roman walls.



Now for another type of racing – you will have read in the past how I usually make at least one trip per year south to Scotland’s two premier auto racing facilities. This trip saw a number of American classes racing. First photos are of American Legends cars, built in Charlotte, North Carolina. They ran the road course at Knockhill, clockwise on one day, and anti-clockwise the other day. And the second track was the quarter mile oval at Lochgelly Raceway, where they were racing America Cup cars, also imported from America. They look like ¼ size NASCAR stock cars.





On an oval, the Scottish sedans race clockwise, while the America Cup cars race anti-clockwise, just like they do in the USA. A function of which side of the car the steering wheel is on. You always want the driver's weight to the inside of the corner for optimum handling.



It looks to be a hot summer here in the far north of Scotland. Wendy is back in the states to be with our new granddaughter, leaving me here to be a Scottish hermit. Well, back to my cave, and best wishes to you all.

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