

Autumn trip to Inverness 2017



Brian weaving his magic spell at Clava Cairns © Derek Leak

Brian Ayers spends part of his year in the north of Scotland and offered to show us the area round Inverness. Amazing geology and scenery, intriguing stone circles, carved Pictish crosses, with snatches of Scottish history involving ambitious Scottish lords, interfering kings of England, Robert the Bruce, and rebellious Jacobites added to the mix. Scotland's history was long a rivalry between the Highlands and Isles, and the Lowlands; the ancient Picts, and the Scots (from Ireland), and the French.

In the shadow of Bennachie, a large mountain, is Easter Aquhorthies stone circle. A well preserved recumbent stone circle, designated by the huge stone lying on its side flanked by two upright stones which always face SSW, it apparently formed a closed door with its uprights as door portals. Upright stones rim the perimeter, diminishing in height to the smallest, opposite the recumbent stone. In its own field overlooking the valley, Loanhead of Daviot stone circle has a smooth central circle perhaps containing a cist. This was surrounded by a covering of small stones kept in place by a

low buttress with a recumbent stone in the SE.

The three Clava cairns cross a field near Culloden Moor. These are late Neolithic/Bronze Age and two circles have outliers like spokes on a wheel ending in a tall upright. One circle is heaped with stones and revetted, with the very centre stone-free. Another is completely covered in stones while the most northerly circle has walls surviving to shoulder height and the tunnel entrance probably once roofed. Cup-marked stones mark the entrance to the darkest space.

Standing on the south bank of a now-drained sea loch with RAF Lossiemouth to the north, is the impressive Spynie Palace. For much of its early years the bishopric was peripatetic before the Pope allowed the move to Spynie in 1206. In 1215 Bishop Bricius claimed the site was open to attack; the cathedral was moved to Elgin but the imposing palace remained at Spynie. The tallest structure is David's or Davey's Tower built in the late 15th–early 16th century, with six storeys above ground and a garret on the top. Arch-shaped openings at the base of the wall

were intriguing. Bishop Patrick Hepburn (1538-73) had installed these gun loops, angled to fire over the banks to boost the castle defences. The custodian brought a long pole to prove the angle of fire would clear the ground.

West of Spynie is Duffus Castle. Its most notable feature, at first sight, was that part of the wall had tumbled down its mound. Originally Duffus was a form of timber motte and bailey. In 1296 it fell to Edward I who brought in Ralph de Cheque in 1306; he started to rebuild in stone but died in 1307. It was captured by Robert Bruce c.1311. The stone keep was divided creating two tower keeps (like Castle Rising) and is the only one like it in Scotland.

Picts were a separate group in this part of Scotland, recorded in late Roman documents and active into the 9th century. They had their own language, written in Ogham, which is now indecipherable. Many Pictish stones are carved with a mix of pagan and Christian scenes and designs. Today many are protected by 'glass' boxes. The Maiden Stone is one of the largest of the Pictish stones, 3m high, of pink granite and highly decorated. The display board helpfully added colours to the details. Were these territorial markers? Most are on slopes with good aspects. Overlooking a once marshy valley, is the very tall Sueno's Stone on its original site. Facing the road is a grisly battle. The Picts were being threatened by both Norse and Scots so does it commemorate a victory?

The Romans noted the northern end of the Tarbat peninsular was an ideal site from which to launch sea raids. The impressive Shandwick stone is over 3m tall and stands with the carved cross in high relief facing the sea, while secular scenes face inland.

The replica tall Hilton of Cadboll Stone is unprotected. The original was removed from the nearby chapel by a 19th-century earl of Sutherland who took it home before giving it to the British Museum. Now it is in the Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh. After excavations, begun in 1998, found thousands of fragments



Hilton of Cadboll stone © Derek Leak

presumed to be part of the original stone, it was finally decided that a replica should stand in the village from whence the earl had taken it. A hunting scene drew much comment from our group. It seems to depict a woman on horseback, side-saddle, with horns. Birds and animals liberally filled interlace borders. Apparently no one has investigated the humps and bumps in the field, perhaps the remains of the church dedicated to St Mary?

Overlooking Cromarty Firth, Nigg Old Church sits in a sheltered site between two deep gullies, and suggests this is a very ancient religious site. An 8th-century Pictish stone has been moved inside this church. Decorated in high relief, 'one of Scotland's greatest art treasures', the ornamental cross resembles a manuscript page in the Book of Kells.

The small town of Rosemarkie is the site of a yet to be found Pictish monastery. A smallish 18th-century town house on the High Street houses a collection of finely carved Pictish stones found in and around the churchyard.

Portmahomack, in the north of the peninsular, is a Pictish monastic site excavated by Martin Carver in 1995-2006. This 6th-7th-



Duffus Castle © Derek Leak

century high status site had developed into an important monastic site which he believed was also an important school of stone sculpture, and that many of the stones we have seen came from here. Around 800 the site burnt down; 200 years later another church was built, later extended with a crypt. The east wall of the Tarbat Centre is the earliest and probably part of this church. Now the museum for the site, it includes excavated features of the earlier building for us to look down on, and an interesting collection of some of the finds and information about relevant crafts and sites.

Cromarty is not just a name in the shipping forecast. It is a port on the southern coast of the mouth of Cromarty Firth, a royal burgh from the 12th century and a British naval base during WWI. The entrance to the Firth is guarded by high rocks or Sutors, also called Giant Shoemakers, formed of a 500myo rock called Moine schist. Hugh Miller, born here in 1801, didn't believe the world could be as old as these rocks were. Unable to reconcile the geology with his faith, he committed suicide. A statue commemorates this geologist and we found his father's house, built in the 1760s with crow-stepped gables, in Church Street among mostly very large Georgian merchant houses. We also passed the impressive court house, a rope works and a wedding party with kilts and bagpipes.

The T-shaped church has 18th-century extensions with balconies over east, west and north aisles. The pulpit in the middle above a communion table meant the preacher could see everyone – we checked. Colourful decorations including heraldry, adorn the backs

of many of the upper pews which were for the landowner's family and tenants.

Coffee shops were an attraction but so was the grassy space by the sea. Here is a monument to the Scottish emigrants, many of whom left from here in the 19th century, driven away by both Scottish and English landowners.

Fortrose cathedral, built of red sandstone, stands in what Brian is convinced was the cathedral close. There has been no surveying but documents in Edinburgh and a house-by-house survey could solve it. It is also on his doorstep since he and Jenny live nearby – a new project? Robbed by Cromwell in 1652–3 to build the citadel at Inverness, he barely left the south aisle housing the burial chapel for Euphemia, Countess of Buchan, who commissioned the south-eastern chapel, aisle and porch. The Chapter House below the sacristy survived because it was partly colonised by the local gentry and the earls of Ross.

Back at Inverness Brian had recommended we explore the river frontage. With few people on the wobbly bridge across the river, it shouldn't move. Wrong, it was a weird sensation.

On a wet Sunday we went west. Telford built the Caledonian Canal 'through Loch Ness', part of the huge geological fault across the Highlands. The loch at its deepest point, 227m, is more than twice the depth of the North Sea.

Built on an outcrop protruding into Loch Ness, Urquhart Castle controlled a very large area, across to the west coast and south to the Isle of Man as well as the major route through the valley. Discovery of a fragment of a Pictish brooch hints that this promontory had been a Pictish site. The position was fortified in the 12th century but the earliest surviving stonework dates to the 13th. A pawn in the dispute between John Balliol and Robert Bruce, this castle too was taken by the English when Edward I invaded in 1296. Garrisoned for the last time in 1689, to ensure the castle would never again be a military stronghold, the gatehouse was blown up in 1692.

At the new visitor centre at Culloden, square granite bricks protrude from the exterior. Those nearest us represent each of the Government dead, the mass at the far end show how many Jacobites had died; it was a massacre. Inside, the Jacobite story is told on the left wall, the Government story on the right and in the centre is part of the story which makes a link between them or with important events in Europe.

Culloden was a battle between cousins in their twenties. Charles Edward Stuart, grandson of James II, faced William Augustus, son of George II. 'Butcher' Cumberland as he was to be known, was Prince of Hanover as well as Duke of Cumberland. The battle of Culloden took place on 15 April 1746, Cumberland's birthday, and lasted 40 minutes. Cumberland lost 50 men, the Jacobites lost 15,000. The position of the two armies is marked with flags on the battle site still entombing many of the dead.

Charles called a halt, went into hiding and sailed to France on 20 September. Cumberland persecuted the rebels; Jacobites were killed, estates seized, the kilt and tartan banned, crops and houses destroyed and his army profited from the sale of loot and cattle.

Fort George sits on a promontory jutting into the Moray Firth. Built on a monumental scale to prevent capture, with high angled walls, deep ditches and heavy guns, it was designed to suppress Jacobite ambitions after the defeat at nearby Culloden. Intended as the main garrison fortress in the Scottish Highlands and named after George II, it is currently the home of the Black Watch, 3rd Battalion The Royal Regiment of Scotland.

Huntly Castle, described as one of Scotland's most impressive late medieval buildings, is more a Renaissance-style palace. Begun c.1450 by the newly ennobled Earl, it was extensively remodelled in the 1550s by the 4th Earl, George Gordon, 'Cock of the North'. Below the top range of new windows, ornate carved text proclaims the owners 'GEORGE GORDON FIRST MARQUIS OF HUNTLY and HENRIETTE STEWART MARQUESS OF HUNTLY'. Over the courtyard turret entrance vertical heraldic panels list Gordon, James VI and a Christian emblem – removed by the Covenanters.

The huge earthwork Bass of Inverurie was built to support a 12th-century royal castle of 1124 and was used by Robert Bruce before winning the (first) battle of Inverurie. Nearby the simple rectangular Kinkell church, built in the 1200s, is a classic medieval Highland church. Unusually it features a stone sacrament house installed on the north wall in 1524 instead of tucked into the altar. This is cross-shaped with a cupboard in the lower part to house the consecrated host. Here Brian showed us a map of the Don valley following recent research. A mass of red dots indicate names incorporating 'Pit' or 'Pict' and identifying a Pictish 'estate centre'. There has been an attempt to reconstruct parishes here.

You can see more of Derek Leak's photos of the trip by visiting the NNAS website news page and following the link.

This was a memorable holiday. Brian and Jenny earning our heartfelt thanks for their hard work.

Judy Sims



Huntly Castle © Derek Leak