

Your holiday guide to the far north of Scotland

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Caithness explorer 2013



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Free Admission





Welcome...

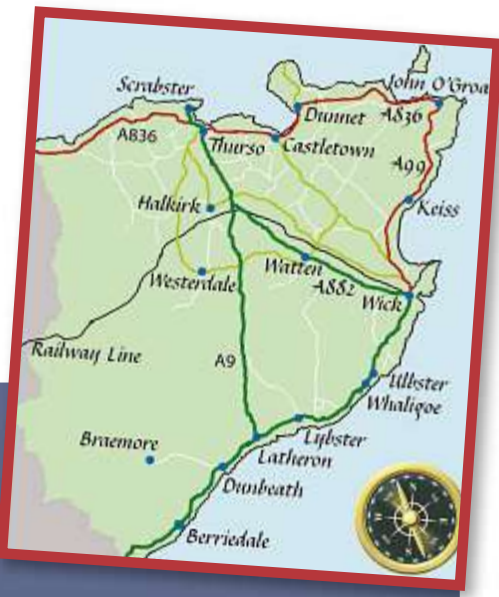
The ruins of Buchollie Castle, south of John O'Groats. It was constructed on the site of the Norse stronghold of Lambaborg, one of the bases of the 12th-century adventurer and warrior Svein Asliefarson – described by one historian as ‘the last of the Vikings’. Photo: Alan Hendry

DRAMATIC skies, rugged cliffs, spectacular sea-stacks, mysterious moors, long summer nights... these are just some of the natural features that give Caithness its unique appeal. These are the Lowlands beyond the Highlands, a county described by its most famous literary son, Neil Gunn, as “that land of exquisite lights”. Getting to Caithness is easier than you may think. The A9 and A99 takes you to Thurso and Wick and beyond, there are railway stations in both towns, and the recently renamed Wick John

O'Groats Airport has connections to Aberdeen and Edinburgh. As well as wide open spaces you'll find a warm welcome in this geographically diverse triangle in the top right-hand corner of the British mainland, hemmed in on its northern and eastern coasts by the sea in all its moods. The vast interior of the far north contains the Flow Country, with its internationally important birds and plants, and there's plenty to see and do in the bustling towns of Wick and Thurso and the attractive villages scattered across the county. The focal point of the county's royal heritage is the Castle of Mey,

former holiday home of the Queen Mother. She visited the castle annually for half a century, forming a close bond with the local community, and this restored 16th-century stronghold has now become one of northern Scotland's most highly rated visitor attractions. However, these high-profile attractions are just part of what Caithness has to offer. All across the county there are historic tales to be discovered, interesting sites to

explore, and great scenery to admire. Welcome to Caithness... and enjoy your stay.



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The spectacular ruin of Castle Sinclair Girmigoe has a commanding cliff-top position on the edge of Sinclair's Bay.

Wick



W

ICK rose to international prominence in the 19th century by becoming

Europe's largest herring port.

At its peak, well over 1,000 fishing boats would set sail during the summer months to net the "silver darlings" that provided the backbone of the town's prosperity.

You can find out about the heyday of the local herring industry at the award-winning **Wick Heritage Centre**. Run on a voluntary basis by the **Wick Society**, the museum has a vast collection of fascinating exhibits.

It is home to the unique **Johnston Collection**, comprising the work of three generations of

a Wick **family of photographers** who captured local life on camera.

Elsewhere you can step back in time in a series of six rooms based on a **typical house** in the early part of the 20th century, while reconstructions of a **busy cooperage**, a **typical fishcurer's office** and a **kipper kiln** give an authentic flavour of Wick when the herring trade was in its prime.

The **Thomas Telford-designed harbour** is still at the heart of Wick – and, following major investment in **marina facilities**, the port is becoming an increasingly popular destination for the yachting fraternity.

Wick has been a royal burgh since 1589 but its origins go back to the days of the Norsemen. The

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Wick Riverside,
looking towards
Bridge Street.
Picture: Alan Hendry

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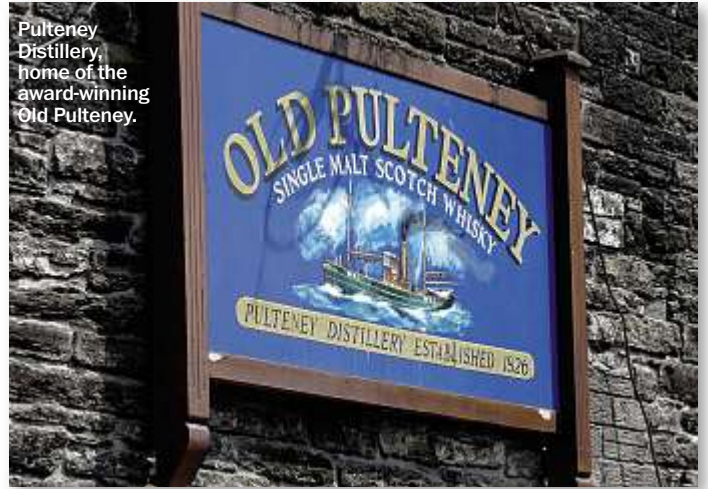
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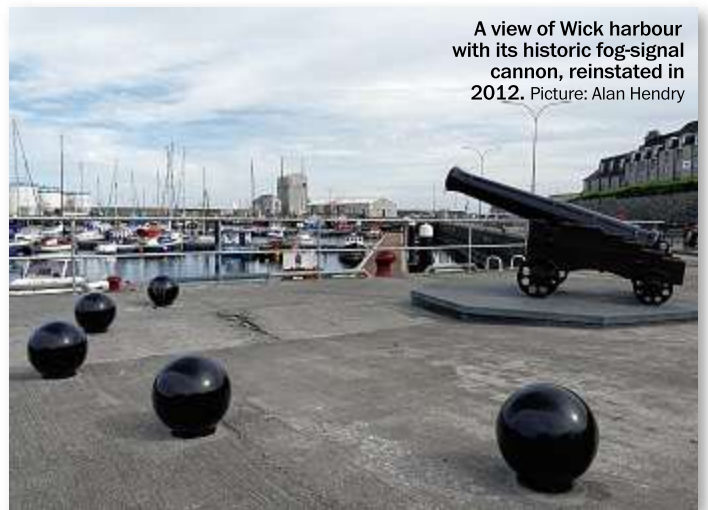




Looking across to the Whaligoe Steps from the cliff-top opposite.
Picture: Alan Hendry



Pulteney Distillery, home of the award-winning Old Pulteney.



A view of Wick harbour with its historic fog-signal cannon, reinstated in 2012. Picture: Alan Hendry

only lasting memorial of those distant times is the **Castle of Old Wick**, known as the **Old Man of Wick** – a gaunt ruin on the cliff-tops to the south of the town.

The scenery here is striking – and it's even better viewed from the sea with **Caithness Seacoast**, which provides exhilarating, **family-friendly tours** along the coast to the north and south of Wick.

Putting, bowling and tennis are available to the public at the **Rosebank Playing Fields** and there is an excellent **indoor swimming pool**, while the riverside offers a delightful walking route all the way to Altimarlach. A **memorial cross** marks the site of what is claimed to be **Scotland's**

last clan battle, more than 300 years ago, when the Sinclairs were slaughtered by the Campbells.

Guided walks on a Telford theme take place from time to time, centred on **Lower Pulteneytown**.

In this part of Wick you'll find a **memorial garden** recalling the most tragic events in the town's modern history – the **Luftwaffe bombing raids** of July and October 1940 that claimed the lives of 18 people, most of them children. The garden was officially opened in 2010, the 70th anniversary year of the two attacks, and it went on to win an award for best local community project.

A prominent corner of the nearby quayside is now occupied



The Castle of Old Wick.
Picture: Alan Hendry

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(above High Street)





by Wick's historic **fog cannon**.

Dating back to 1881, it was originally situated above the bay to help mariners navigate their way to port in misty weather. It was then relocated to the town's riverside for many years before **Wick Harbour Authority** decided to give the fog signal a new home at the port.

The refurbished cannon was unveiled as part of the **Wick Diamond Jubilee HarbourFest** in the summer of 2012.

Strange as it may sound, a small corner of Wick has given the town one of its biggest claims to fame...

Measuring just 6ft 9in across, **Ebenezer Place** is officially the **shortest street in the world**. It forms the narrow end section of **Mackay's Hotel**, a building dating back to 1883.

Ebenezer Place was mentioned in the town's records from 1887, although formal recognition that it is the world's shortest street only came in 2006 following a visit by the editor-in-chief of **Guinness World Records**.

That was after hotelier **Murray Lamont** had created a doorway to the hotel's popular No. 1 Bistro – the only address in Ebenezer Place.

Pulteney Distillery is the home of the multi-award-winning **Old Pulteney** – a malt that reflects the proud seafaring heritage of the area.

Old Pulteney 21 Years Old received the title of world whisky of the year in **Jim Murray's 2012 Whisky Bible awards**.

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The spectacular ruin of **Castle Sinclair Gornigoe** has a commanding cliff-top position on the edge of **Sinclair's Bay**, three miles north of Wick. It's the only castle in Scotland to be listed by the **World Monuments Fund**.

For many years the site was thought to comprise two separate castles, but recent research has indicated it was always one coherently planned fortress.

The Sinclair family, later to

become the **earls of Caithness**, occupied the site from at least the latter part of the 14th century. In its heyday there would have been a drawbridge over the

dry moat in front of the castle.

The castle can be reached by following the road from Wick to Papigoe, turning left at the approach to Staxigoe, and



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Memorial cross marking the site of the clan battle at Altimarlach.



Wick's memorial garden, commemorating those who died in wartime bombing raids.



continuing as far as the car park near **Noss Head**. It's then a reasonably level walk of about half a mile to the site.

There's a series of interpretation panels giving an intriguing insight into what the castle would have looked like at various stages.

Down the coast from Wick, on the way to Lybster, is the spectacular inlet of **Whaligoe**.

Three hundred and sixty-five stone steps lead down a precipitous grassy cliff to a sheltered spot that used to be a busy fishing port.

Catches of **cod, haddock or ling** would be gutted by hardy crews of

local women and carried up the steps in baskets.

Whaligoe is just off the A99, opposite a road sign pointing inland to the **Cairn of Get**.

There is a small parking area and here you will find the **Whaligoe Steps Café**.

The steps are not suitable for the very young or the very old, or indeed anyone who is not too steady on their feet. It would be inadvisable to take pets. Great care is required to negotiate the downward journey, and even those who regard themselves as reasonably fit can find the upward trek quite tiring.



The marina at Wick harbour.

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Visitors comments

*My umpteenth visit - still fantastic
Local*

*A warren of treasures –
New Zealand*

*Loved the blend of history from many
angles – U.S.A.*

*Have visited lots of museums in the
UK. This is the best – Kent*

*The people who showed us around
were very knowledgeable and helpful
– Canada*

*What a wonderful treasure house – a
tribute to the town's history –
Shropshire*

OPENING TIMES:

Easter to End October, 10am - 5pm
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Thurso Pipe Band is celebrating its centenary in 2013. Photo: Garry Baxter



Pipe bands

P

PIPE band parades are among the highlights of the summer entertainment calendar for local

people and visitors.

The county's two senior bands are steeped in tradition and are a source of great pride for their respective communities.

Thurso Pipe Band and **Wick RBLs Pipe Band** both hold regular street parades on Saturday evenings during the tourist season, and also perform at Highland Games and galas throughout the north.

Thurso Pipe Band celebrates its centenary this year and is marking the occasion with a series of special events.

The band wears the **MacKenzie tartan**, the first uniforms having been ex-army kilts and jackets. When war broke out in 1914 a number of the members were called up for active service. However, those that remained kept the band alive throughout the war years.

Due to shortages of funding the band members improvised by dyeing their ex-army jackets black, and a **mace was hand-made** by the then drum major from a paperweight and a broom handle.

When **John Macdonald of Achnavast** took over as pipe major in 1923 it began an unbroken 71-year reign of the same Macdonald family holding that post.

In recent times the band has seen a welcome increase in younger members. Highlights have included



Members of Wick RBLs Pipe Band playing at Dunbeath Castle. Photo: Marcus Mennie

trips to **Brilon in Germany** (Thurso's twin town) and to **New York** to attend **Tartan Week**.

The Wick band had its origins in 1919 when ex-servicemen returning from the First World War got together under the title of "**The Comrades of the Great War Pipe Band**". Its uniform represents the original colours of the **Seaforth Highlanders**.

In the 1980s the band became affiliated to the Wick branch of the **Royal British Legion Scotland**

and adopted its present title. It has formed part of the massed band of the RBLs for the annual ceremony of **Beating Retreat** in Edinburgh for many years and has made many appearances abroad.

The band has its own hall which hosts Scottish variety shows on Wednesday evenings throughout the summer. Every July the band stages **Wick Pipe Band Week**, putting on a packed programme of fundraising events at local venues.

The Wick band marked its **90th**

anniversary four years ago with a special massed bands festival. Musicians travelled from as far away as Germany and Switzerland to take part.

Caithness Junior Pipe Band attracts members from across the county in the 11-17 age group who perform at various events around the county.

■ For more information, visit www.thursopipeband.co.uk, www.wickpipeband.org or www.caithnessjuniorpipeband.co.uk

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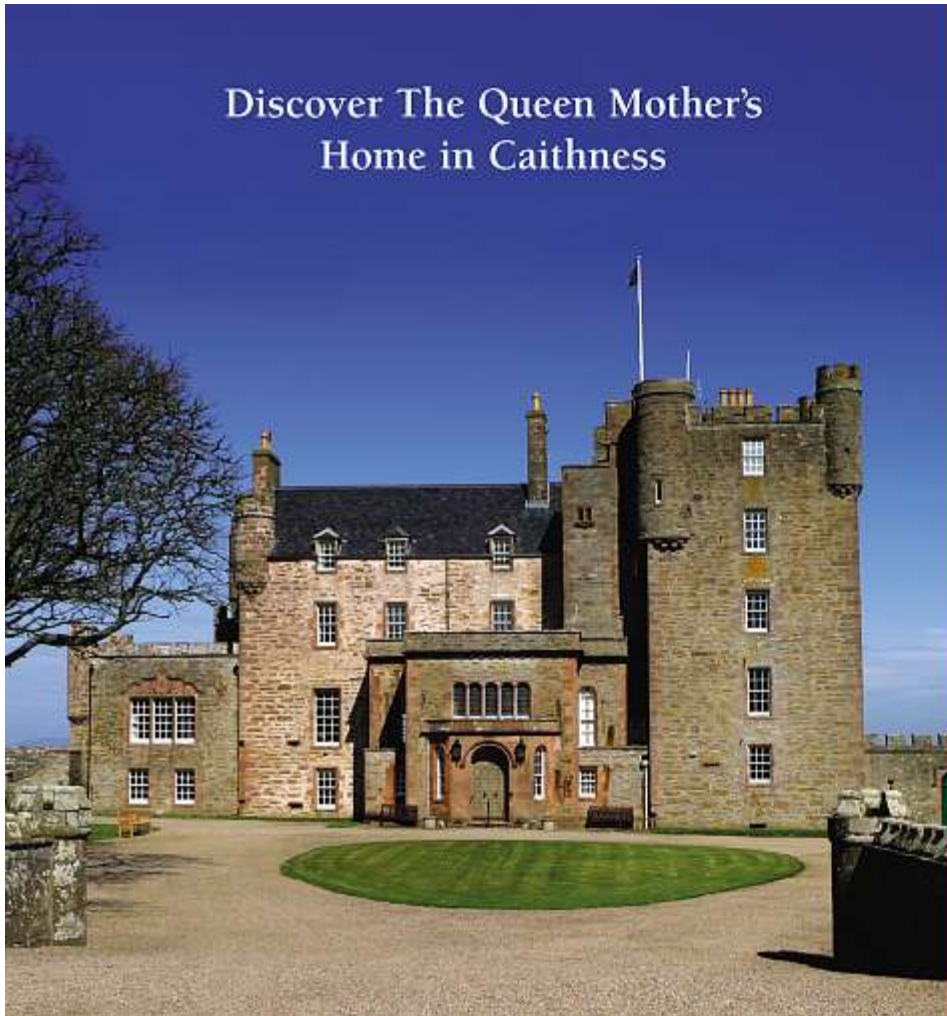
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"From my first sight of the Castle of Mey I fell in love with this district," the Queen Mother once said.

Castle of Mey



T

HE Castle of Mey, once the much-loved holiday home of the Queen Mother, is the jewel in the crown of Caithness tourism.

Her Majesty turned a dilapidated stronghold into a royal retreat that she visited annually for half a century until her death at the age of 101 in 2002.

Now it has become one of the north of Scotland's most highly rated visitor attractions, holding VisitScotland's highest award of a **five-star quality** assurance grading.

Tours of the castle and gardens are hugely popular, and the quality of the visitor experience has been enhanced further by the addition of a purpose-built tearoom and gift shop and the opening of an animal centre featuring a variety of unusual breeds.

Many thousands of people have taken the opportunity to visit the **16th-century fortress** which, for the best part of 50 years, had a special place in the Queen Mother's heart. "From my first sight of the Castle of Mey I fell in love with this district," she once said.

The castle and gardens are now looked after by the **Queen Elizabeth Castle of Mey Trust**, allowing

visitors to see the Queen Mother's summer home much as she left it after her final visit.

Guided tours pass through the hall, drawing room, equerry's room, library, main bedrooms, dining room, butler's pantry, kitchen and gardens.

Highlights include the extravagant **jardinière centrepiece** in the front hall; a striking **portrait of the Queen Mother with her corgi Ranger** above the fireplace in the equerry's room; and personal memorabilia, **treasured family photographs** and gifts that still adorn the table in the library.

The **traditional Scottish walled garden** - planted with vegetables, surrounded by fruit, herbaceous borders and rose gardens - and the east garden were created out of a wilderness by the Queen Mother, and both are part of the tour.

The nearby **visitor centre** has a tearoom serving snacks and meals and there's a gift shop selling china, glassware, books and postcards along with a variety of **Mey Selections products**. There's a range of scarves and throws in a design inspired by one of the Queen Mother's favourite outfits.

The **animal centre** has proved very popular with children and adults alike. It features some unusual sheep breeds, waterfowl, ducks and geese, a donkey, rabbits, British alpine goats and rare-breed pigs, while **Daisy the wooden cow** allows visitors to try their hand at milking.

Becoming a Friend of the Castle of Mey

gives unlimited free access to the castle, gardens and animal centre during normal opening hours.

The Prince of Wales - officially the Duke of Rothesay when in Scotland - is a regular visitor to Caithness and it is clear that he feels a strong connection to the county his grandmother adored so much.

The Castle of Mey is about 15

miles east of Thurso and six miles west of John O'Groats. Normal opening is from May 1 to September 30 but the castle will be shut from July 29 to August 12 inclusive this year. The castle is open from 10.20am. Last admission at 4pm. The visitor centre, tearoom, shop, grounds and animal centre are open from 10am until 5pm.



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Sir John's Square in the centre of Thurso. Photo: Alan Hendry

Thurso



T

THURSO is the most northerly town on the British mainland, and has a population of around 8,000.

On the west side of **Thurso Bay** is **Scrabster**, where the car ferry **Hamnavoe** sails daily to Stromness in Orkney.

Over 10 centuries ago Thurso was founded by Viking earls. It was named **Torsaa** (Thor's river) after the Norse god of war. The 25-mile-long **River Thurso** ranks as one of Scotland's most important salmon fisheries. The ancient part of Thurso, close by the west side of the river mouth, was called the **Fisherbiggins** – the place where fishermen lived.

Sir John Sinclair was a late 18th-century genius whose work as a politician, a chronicler of his times, a leading agriculturist and an inspirer of town planning gained him an international reputation. As the industries which he backed started to blossom, he decided that Thurso needed a new town extension. He

laid out an attractive area in a grid street pattern.

Thurso's boom was due to the flagstone trade – the **flagstones** from surrounding quarries were among the best in the country for making pavements before the days of concrete slabs.

Not far from the town centre is **Old St Peter's Kirk**, one of the finest religious buildings of the Middle Ages to survive in the north of Scotland. The ruins date from the 13th century.

For those who prefer more active pursuits, the town's indoor swimming pool – which includes a toddlers' section – is a popular attraction, while boating is available during the summer alongside the river.

The Mall offers a lovely walking short route, going up one side of the river and back along the other after crossing a footbridge.

For centuries, the folk in Thurso's old town collected their water from a nearby well. Today, the small stone building with a conical roof which encloses the **Meadow Well** still stands close to the **Royal Hotel**.

Pennyland House, on the western outskirts of the town, was the birthplace of **Sir William Smith**, founder of the Boys' Brigade in 1883. There is a display of BB memorabilia in the David Fraser room, based in Thurso's **William Smith Memorial Hall**.

The chilly waters of Caithness are a far cry from Hawaii or California or Australia's Bondi Beach... but that hasn't stopped Thurso emerging as a highly rated **international surfing venue**.

Here on the northern edge of mainland Scotland some of the **finest waves in Europe** can be experienced, and because of this Caithness has played host to a number of prestigious surf competitions.

Thurso has staged several events in the **O'Neill Cold Water Classic** world series surfing competition and has held the UK and Scottish surfing championships. In addition, the **surf kayak world championships** were held twice just off Thurso harbour.

Moves are now being made by local councillors to establish Thurso as the watersports capital of Britain by 2016.

Six miles south of Thurso is historic **Halkirk**, the first planned village in the Highlands, with a high standard of dining and accommodation. It is a very

popular spot with anglers coming to fish on the River Thurso.

An active local community group organises a range of events in Halkirk's historic **Ross Institute**.



Vincent Duvinaç of France competes in the O'Neill Cold Water Classic.



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C

CAITHNESS Horizons opened to the public in December 2008 following the refurbishment of

Thurso Town Hall and adjacent Carnegie Library.

The magnificently restored building houses a **permanent exhibition** telling the story of Caithness from the geological period known as the Devonian (about 416 to 359 million years ago) to the present day.

The temporary exhibition gallery hosts an **annual programme of changing exhibitions**. In addition there is a **gift shop and café** which serves delicious home baking.

Commanding attention on your arrival are the **Skinnet and Ulbster Pictish stones**. Upstairs, themed displays bring to life the fascinating heritage of Caithness. Highlights include **archaeological objects**

that date from the Neolithic, Bronze and Iron ages relating to the lives of the broch-dwellers, Picts and Vikings who made Caithness their home.

A particular treat is a **collection of Viking artefacts** from a male Viking burial at Reay (west of Thurso) which are on loan from National Museums Scotland.

Visitors can also wander through **displays of birds**, track bird migration routes and find out about **Thurso's famous geologist and botanist, Robert Dick** (1811-1866). The displays feature specimens from Dick's herbarium, now accessible to the public for the first time in many years, along with personal items and fossil specimens.

The social history of Caithness is brought to life by displays that include a **penny-farthing bicycle** and film clips.

The story of the **Dounreay nuclear power research establishment** - which shaped the recent economy and history of the county - is also featured. Caithness Horizons explores the activities that took place at Dounreay over a period of more than 40 years, its environmental impact and its influence on the community.

The centre was officially opened by **Prince Charles, Duke of Rothesay**, in August 2009 - on the same day that Caithness Horizons discovered it had been awarded five-star visitor attraction status by VisitScotland.

More recently it has been awarded full museum accreditation by the **Museums, Libraries and Archives Council**.



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Pop in and say hi!

Caithness Horizons stands in the heart of Thurso, on the High Street at the north-east end of the pedestrian area. Parking is available immediately opposite, and there is more within an easy walk.

Caithness Horizons is open Monday to Saturday, 10am to 6pm.

Between April and September it is also open on Sundays, 11am to 4pm (entrance is free of charge).

The museum plays host to a number of special events, so visitors should check the website (www.caithnesshorizons.co.uk) for up-to-date listings.

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C

AMSTER Cairns are the best known of the county's numerous ancient sites.

The cairns - situated four miles north-west of Lybster on the minor road to Watten - were raised as **burial monuments** during the Neolithic age, more than **5,000 years ago**.

The land was more fertile than today and it is likely that the cairns were sited on the edge of good farmland. The ground between the road and the cairns is quite boggy now, but a boardwalk allows visitors to keep their feet dry.

The **long cairn of Camster**, the

larger of the two, is **200ft in length and 65ft wide**. It has a main burial chamber which can be entered by a passage from the south side.

Camster round cairn, 55ft in diameter and 12ft high, is regarded by many experts as the **finest chambered tomb of its period in Britain**. It is under official protection, and excavation has made the main chamber in the heart of the cairn accessible through the original entrance passage.

These mighty structures are believed to have been used over the centuries to **bury ancient chiefs**. Or they may have been built by people who worshipped a **"Mother Earth" goddess** as the provider of

the grain crops that were essential to the survival of these communities.

Other notable chambered cairn sites in Caithness are the **Cairn of Get**, signposted from the A99 between Lybster and Wick, and **Cnoc Freiceadain**, near Dounreay. The latter comprises two long cairns, set at right angles to each other, on top of the **Hill of Shebster**.

The **Yarrows Archaeological Trail** (signposted from the A99, south of Thrumster) includes the **South Yarrows Broch** and the remains of Neolithic burial cairns dating back well over 5,500 years. Recent research has unearthed flint tools that are believed to be **7,700 years old**, providing the

earliest known evidence of human habitation in Caithness.

An intriguing series of stone rows dating back some 4,000 years can be seen at the **Hill o' Many Stanes**, north of Lybster. About **200 stones**, most of them only knee-high, are set out in 22 rows running north and south. At one time there may have been as many as 600 stones covering the gently sloping field.

The people of the late Bronze Age left behind them mysterious standing stones in Caithness as well as in Lewis and Orkney.

At **Achavanich**, near Lybster, there is a striking collection of stones easily accessible to the public.

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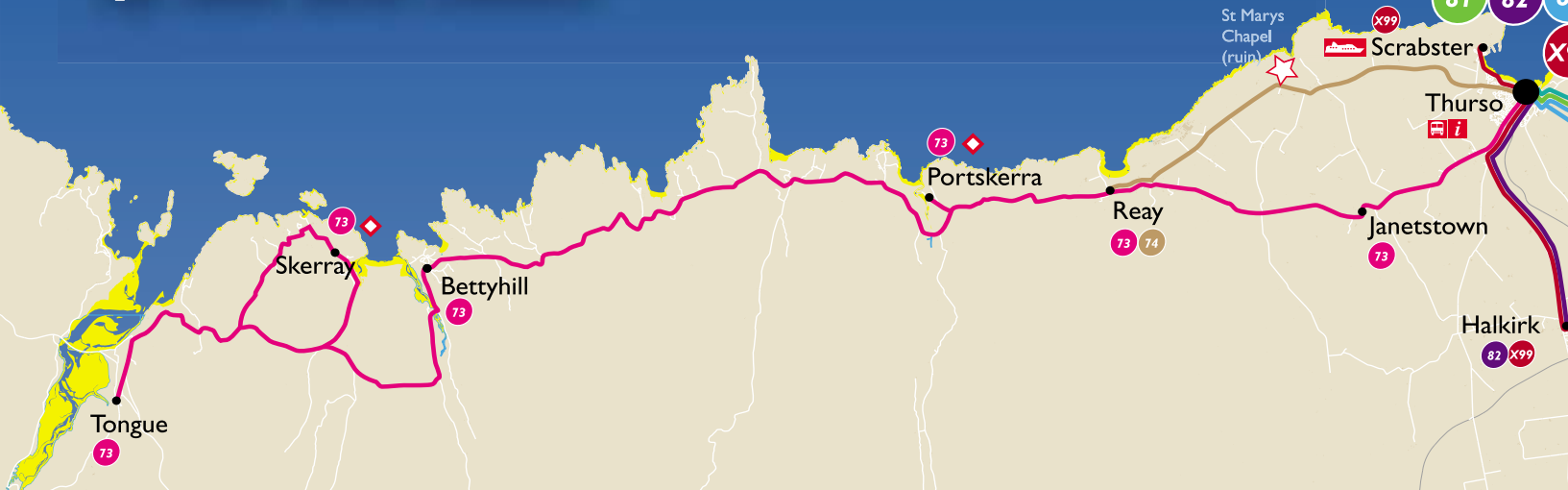
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There are so many places to visit in Caithness and we've marked just a few of them on our route map, so you've got an idea of where you can get to using public transport. You can download route timetables from our website to plan your journey ahead and there's no need for exact change on our buses, our drivers carry change.

We have a great range of money saving tickets for you to choose from. Our adult and group dayrider tickets allow you to travel within the town zones of Thurso or Wick, or the Caithness dayrider covers the services operating within the whole of this map. Dayrider tickets offer unlimited travel within the zones, so you can make the most of your day!

Single and return tickets are available on all our routes, but ask about a dayrider, as this can be better value. Child fares are also available on all our routes for under 16's and children under 5 travel free.

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John
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Looking across the headland towards the magnificent Stacks of Duncansby.
Photo: Alan Hendry



T

HE ferry service that operates from John O'Groats is continuing a tradition that began 500 years ago with the enterprising seafarer who gave the village its distinctive name: **Jan de Groot**.

A mound and flagpole mark the site where Jan built his famous **octagonal house** during the reign of James IV, between 1488 and 1513.

Jan was the leader of a **small group of Dutchmen** who settled in the area to start up the first regular ferry service to Orkney on the orders of the king.

Jan is buried in nearby **Canisbay churchyard**, but his seafaring legacy lives on.

A passenger service to Orkney is operated by John O'Groats Ferries, offering a choice of tours on the **Pentland Venture** every day from the

beginning of May until the end of September.

The same company provides **wildlife tours** around the coast between the middle of June and the end of August. These afternoon cruises last an hour and a half, giving close-up views of spectacular cliffs and abundant bird life. **Seals, dolphins** and sometimes even **whales** can also be seen off north-east Caithness.

A **car ferry to Orkney** is operated by Pentland Ferries along the coast at **Gills Bay**, using the modern catamaran **Pentalina**.

The distinctive **John O'Groats House Hotel** has been given a new lease of life as part of an ambitious redevelopment by **Natural Retreats**.

The hotel has been transformed into a self-catering complex of **19 luxury apartments** with **23 detached holiday residences**

The John O'Groats ferry, Pentland Venture.



nearby, giving a major boost to tourism in the far north.

One landmark not to be missed is the **Last House in mainland Scotland**, home to a small museum which offers a window into the

past via photos of the local area.

Nearby there are **craft studios** and **souvenir shops**.

John O'Groats has long been famous for **end-to-end fundraising marathons**. Every summer sees a

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With spectacular scenery, superb seabird colonies and bracing sea air, the coastal walk to nearby **Duncansby Head** is an unforgettable outing for birdwatchers and keen walkers.

Either drive to the lighthouse car park and stroll across the headland from there, or start out from John O'Groats itself and follow the coastal path to **Sannick Bay** before joining the single-track Duncansby road.

Ages of pounding waves have carved the red sandstone cliffs into a unique combination of **sea-stacks, caves, natural arches** and **bridges**, as well as two spectacular narrow inlets with perpendicular sides.

Halfway between John O'Groats and Wick you'll find the **Caithness Broch Centre**, where you can find out more about the county's ancient past.

Brochs were large stone towers built more than 2000 years ago and Caithness has more of these per square mile than any other region. The area around **Sinclair's Bay** is especially important, with the **densest distribution of brochs in Scotland**.

There are three main narratives at the centre: the 19th-century community that first excavated the brochs; the people who lived in the area 2000 years ago; and those who now work and live with the brochs. The project is a collaboration with National Museums Scotland, which returned **artefacts from national museums** for display.

Caithness Broch Centre is located at **Auckengill** and is open Monday to Friday from April to September, and also on Saturdays in July/August, from 10.30am to 4.30pm. Admission is free.

For almost 400 years Caithness was ruled and dominated by the **Norsemen**.

Along with the Orkney and Shetland isles, Caithness was **part of the Viking earldom of Orkney** and it was only in 1266 that Norway ceded the county to the Scottish



White sands between John O'Groats and Duncansby Head.
Photo: Alan Hendry



A seal near John O'Groats.
Photo: Alan Hendry

crown with the signing of the **Treaty of Perth**.

Those were stirring times of battle and intrigue. And often they were violent times: of the 25 earls of Orkney who governed Caithness in this period, only nine died of natural causes.

The chief legacy of that era is now to be found in the names of towns,

villages, geographical features and farms in the county. The name of the county itself derives from the **Norse Katanes, meaning "Headland of the Cats"**.

The John O'Groats area contains many echoes of Viking times.

Archaeological research at Frewick (Thrasvik, or "Thra's inlet") discovered an ancient

Norse settlement which seems to have included a **Viking-age fish-processing plant**. Nearby is the ruined **Buchollie Castle**, which was constructed on the site of the Norse stronghold called **Lambaborg**.

This was one of the bases of the 12th-century Caithness farmer, adventurer, warrior and Viking, **Svein Asliefarson**. Svein's exploits

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are still talked about in the county where he is known locally as "Svein [or Sweyn] the Pirate". The **Swanson clan** claims descent from this larger-than-life character who was called by one historian "the last of the Vikings".

Svein's local estate was situated at **Duncansby** - Dungal's baer, or "Dungal's settlement".

Duncansby was also the site of a **bloody battle between the local Norsemen**, led by **Earl Sigurd the Stout**, and a Scottish army under the command of **King Malcolm II**. A later earl, **Thorfinn the Mighty**, maintained a naval base at Duncansby where, the sagas say, he kept five well-manned longships.

From Duncansby Head can be seen the island of **Stroma**. This was named by the Vikings **Straumey**, meaning "**the island in the stream**" - the stream in question being the swift and turbulent Pentland Firth.



Dramatic coastal scenery at Duncansby Head. Photo: Alan Hendry



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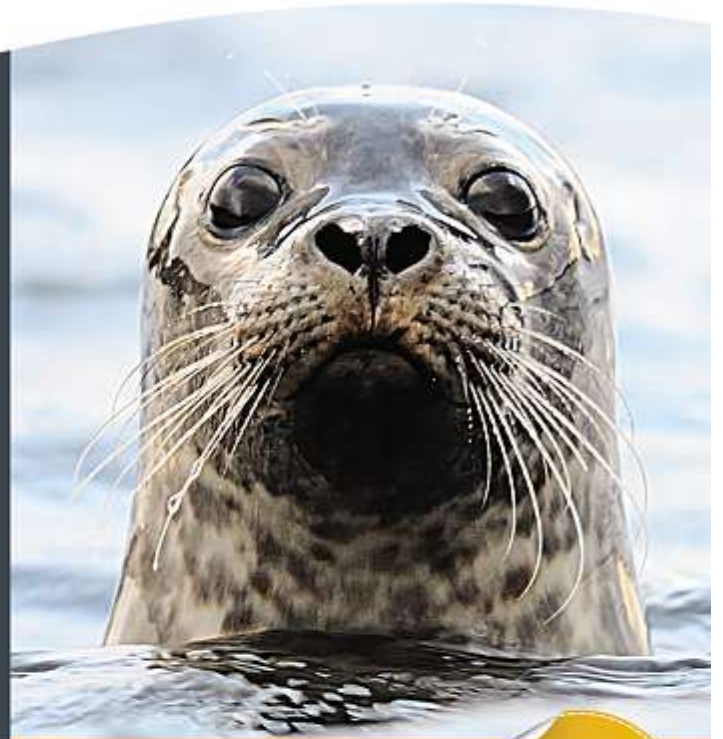
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Lybster & Latheron



The Clan Gunn Heritage Centre at Latheron.



Lybster harbour.
Photo: Alan Hendry

T

HE story of Lybster's rapid rise from humble beginnings to become one of Scotland's foremost herring

ports is told at the **Waterlines Visitor Centre**. throw from the pebbly shore, Waterlines combines education with fun in a family-friendly environment while celebrating Lybster's special role in the **history of the Scottish fishing industry**.

Located in carefully restored harbour buildings just a stone's

This attractive east coast village was planned some 200 years ago by the enterprising local laird **General Patrick Sinclair**.

By the late 1830s Lybster had grown to such an extent that it was the third largest port in Scotland (after Wick and Fraserburgh), with **101 boats** fishing out of its thriving harbour.

Waterlines was created by **Lybster Heritage Trust** with support from public agencies.

It is located at the end of the

narrow road leading down to the harbour from Lybster village, and there is a car park at the front.

Its main first-floor exhibition area features a **smokehouse**, giving visitors an authentic whiff of the **kipping process**, and the story of fishing in the Lybster area - from the **herring days** through to the **seine-net era** - is told in a series

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is situated in the heart of this small fishing village, convenient for shops, bank, and all amenities including beautiful harbour, golf course (nine hole), and bowling. This traditional stone built house, a home from home with real open fire, consists of four letting bedrooms, two with en-suite facilities. Convenient for Wick, Thurso and John O'Groats it is suitable for a stopover to the ferry or spending a few days enjoying the beautiful countryside and coastline. Prices from £25.00.



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Clan Gunn Heritage Trust SCO13311

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of information panels. One end of the building is devoted to a **boat-building workshop**.

Waterlines is open daily from May to October, 11am to 5pm. Group bookings can be arranged (01593 721520).

Near the foot of the road leading down to the harbour there's a signpost marking the start of the **Swiney Hill coastal walk**. This takes you above the harbour and to the south of the village, with a superb vantage point for wildlife-watching once you've crossed a stile or two. There's an offshoot path leading to the historic **Brethren Well**, reputed to have been used by monks many centuries ago.

Lybster itself has excellent hotel accommodation and amenities including a **nine-hole golf course**. Its clubhouse is the **one-time ticket office of the light railway** that operated on the coastal route between Lybster and Wick from 1903 until 1944.

The **Mill of Forse at Latheron** is a **restored oatmeal mill**. It was saved from dereliction in the 1990s and the ground floor converted for use as a ceramics studio. It is now home to **studio potter and sculptor Jenny Mackenzie Ross** and **goldsmith and glass-maker Patricia Niemann**.

Close by, at **Forse shore**, the ruins of a **14th-century Norse castle** crown the promontory. The castle overlooks a rugged area

of coastline punctuated by small coves, many of which are home to abandoned fishing stations from the days of the herring boom. For the sure-footed walker it is well worth exploring.

Visitors can be sure of a warm welcome at the **Clan Gunn Heritage Centre**, just off the main east coast road in the 18th-century **Old Parish Church of Latheron**. However, the Gunns didn't always present such a friendly face to those who entered their territory.

The motto of this clan – one of Scotland's oldest, and descended from the Viking sea wolves – is an uncompromising **Aut pax aut bellum, "Either peace or war"**. And often it was the latter course of action that prevailed.

Robert Bain, writing in the 1930s, said the Gunns' "warlike and ferocious" reputation stemmed from a series of feuds with other clans, notably the **Keiths** and the **Mackays**.

The Clan Gunn claims direct descent from **Gunni, grandson of Svein Asliefarson**, the 12th-century Viking marauder who cut a violent swathe through the pages of the **Orkneyinga Saga**. In its account of Svein's death at the hands of the Dubliners, the *Saga* notes that "apart from those of higher rank than himself, he was the greatest man the western world has ever seen in ancient and modern times".

Away from this bloody legacy

of battles and feuds, the centre invites you to consider the intriguing theory that a leading Gunn may have reached American shores long before **Christopher Columbus's** celebrated voyage of 1492. It has been suggested that Sir James, chief of the clan at the end of the 14th century, may have accompanied **Prince Henry Sinclair, Earl of Orkney**, on an expedition to the New World as far back as 1398.

The compelling evidence includes an effigy of a medieval knight in armour, alleged to be Sir James, engraved on a rock face in Massachusetts. A cast of the effigy is on display in the centre.

From more recent times the achievements of the Gunns in art, literature, science and industry are recorded at the centre, which boasts one of the best clan archives.

Dating from 1734, the church

was gifted to the Clan Gunn Society in 1974 and the centre was officially opened in 1985 after a major fundraising programme. It has come to represent a focal point for the **Clan Gunn Society**, which upholds the traditions of the clan internationally.

Seventy-seven septas are associated with the clan – including the **Georgesons, Hendersons, Jamiesons, Mansons, Robsons** and **Williamsons** – and there are related societies in North America and New Zealand, reflecting the extensive emigration of previous generations of Gunns.

The Clan Gunn Heritage Centre is situated just off the A99. It is open from June 1 to September 30, Mondays to Saturdays, from 11am to 1pm and from 2pm to 4pm.

It also has a clan shop. Call 01593 741700 or visit www.clangunnsociety.org



Some small coves along the coast are home to abandoned fishing stations.



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Lybster Heritage Trust SCO27408

Dunnet



Out for a ride on Dunnet Beach.



Dunnet Head.

D

UNNET Head is the most northerly point on the UK mainland, and there's a feeling of being on the edge of the world as waves pound against high cliffs rising majestically to 100m above sea level.

A Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), the location of two radar stations during World War Two, and home to **North Atlantic puffins** amongst a multitude of other bird populations, the headland is full of historical interest and **rare wildlife**. **Grey seals** bask in **Brough Bay**, sheltering from the vagaries of the turbulent Pentland Firth.

The **Dunnet Head lighthouse** was built in 1831 by **Robert Stevenson**, grandfather of the author Robert Louis Stevenson. It was automated in 1989. From the viewpoint on a clear day you can see as far as **Cape Wrath** to the west or enjoy a **panoramic view** across the **Pentland Firth to Orkney** to the north.

Visitors can discover much more about the area's wildlife and history by stopping off at the **Seadrift centre at Dunnet Bay**.

As well as learning about the **whales, dolphins, seals, seabirds and animals** to be seen in and around Dunnet, you can compare your weight with that of a bull seal

or size up to a gannet. At Seadrift you can also find out the best places to visit, or join the **countryside rangers** on a guided walk.

The centre is located at the north end of the three-mile sweep of **Dunnet sands**, about a mile from **Dunnet village**. Seadrift is open daily (apart from Thursdays and Saturdays) from 2pm to 5pm in May, June and September, and from 10.30am to 5pm in July and August. Entrance is free but donations are welcome.

Nearby is the delightful **Dunnet Forest**, the most northerly community woodland on the mainland. Managed by **Dunnet Forestry Trust**, it features an **all-abilities trail**, a **horse-riding route**

and a number of interesting **wood and stone sculptures**.

Groups of volunteers have taken part in a wide range of projects such as tree-planting and maintenance, path-building, pond restoration and control of invasive vegetation.

Mary-Ann's Cottage is a small homestead with outbuildings at **Westside**, just a few miles from Dunnet Head. The cottage was built in the middle of the 19th century and occupied by the members of one family, the **Youngs**.

It remains as an almost perfect example of the way in which crofters lived and worked before mechanisation. Visitors are given a fascinating guided tour and told the story of the family.

Mary-Ann's Cottage at Dunnet



The Cottage lies on a small croft overlooking Dunnet Bay, worked by the same family over three generations. Built around 1850 the Cottage has remained largely unchanged over the years and visitors can step back in time and imagine what it would be like to live in a room with a wee box bed, heated by a peat fire, where Mary-Ann and her husband spent their non-working hours, cooked and slept. In the adjoining outbuildings there are implements and evidence of farming practices from earlier times.

Open 1st June - 30th September:
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Admission charge

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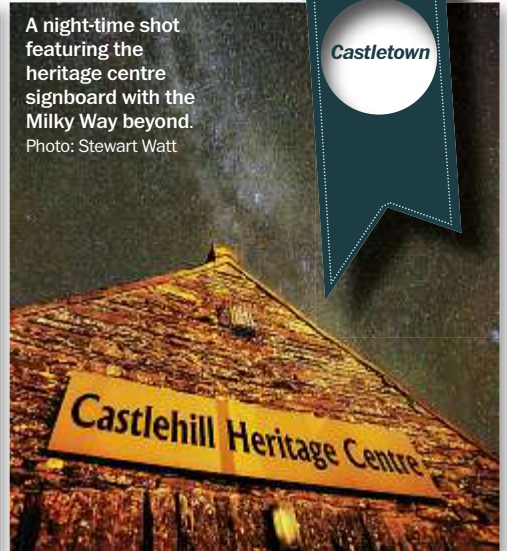
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Bothy Night with local band Clapshot.
Photo: Neil Buchan / Castletown Heritage Society

A night-time shot featuring the heritage centre signboard with the Milky Way beyond.
Photo: Stewart Watt



HERE was a time when flagstones from the north coast of Caithness were transported to pave the streets of cities from Sydney in Australia to Montevideo in Uruguay.

Long renowned for its attractive, hard-wearing qualities which have seen it described as the county's "most versatile and durable natural resource", the **local flagstone** was traditionally used for paving, dyking and roofing until landowner and entrepreneur **Sheriff James Traill** saw its potential and built a worldwide industry on it.

In the 1820s at **Castlehill** he founded a commercial operation which, at its peak, employed as many as 500 workers with up to 35,000 tons of flagstone being produced annually until production ceased in the 1920s.

You can find out about the heyday of the flagstone trade and many other aspects of local life at the award-winning **Castlehill Heritage Centre**, located in a former farm steading and dairy.

It is run by **Castletown Heritage Society**, a voluntary group dedicated to promoting the history and culture of the area. Its members organise a wide range of **workshops and interactive sessions**, often aimed at preserving vernacular skills from **drystone dyking** to **spinning and weaving**.

Each November, CHS stages a traditional **Bothy Night** featuring local artistes. The **Castlehill Archaeological Research Facility**, located within the centre, has a **viewing gallery** where visitors can

see the work being carried out. One of the highlights of the past year was the **re-enactment of an Edwardian concert** held exactly 100 years before in the village hall.

Over the past year, CHS has been working with **Caithness Astronomy Group** to have the heritage centre officially designated as a "**Dark Sky Discovery Site**". This came to fruition in October when the centre was announced as one of 18 new sites to be so designated – and the only one north of Inverness.

Stargazing events run by the astronomy group featured strongly throughout the year, culminating with participation in the BBC's **Stargazing Live** series of events with Castlehill featured on BBC Alba.

There was also the unveiling of the centre's latest exhibit – a 1941 **Rolls-Royce Merlin** engine which had been recovered by the late **Bob Falconer** and his friend **Lewis Sinclair** from a Hurricane fighter plane that was based at RAF Castletown during World War Two.

The plane had crashed into the moss in the middle of Caithness during a training exercise. The engine is on loan to Castletown Heritage Society pending the establishment of a suitable location for its display by **Halkirk Heritage and Vintage Motor Society**.

Another special event in 2012, devised by chairwoman Muriel Murray, was an **Olympic day** which encouraged children to learn about the heritage of their local environment. Youngsters were invited to visit five local venues and at each one they would take part in a challenge to earn an "Olympic" ring.

The past year has also seen the world premiere of a short film as part of the **Wild North Festival**. It had been made during the course of the previous two days by participants at a **video-making**

workshop run at Castlehill by brothers **Toby and Fionn Watts**.

Continuing its theme of an annual science-based event, the society hosted a **hands-on workshop** where children designed and built their own **automaton!**

Although there is free entry for visitors to Castlehill Heritage Centre (donations welcome), the society does charge for most workshops and some activity days – details are always advertised in advance.

The centre, which has an **attractive heritage garden**, is open all year except Christmas Day and New Year's Day on Wednesday, Saturday and Sunday afternoons (2-

4pm); other times by arrangement. See www.castletownheritage.co.uk

A well-established **Flagstone Heritage Trail** goes round the remnants of the flagstone works and there's a series of interpretive information boards. This scenic walk allows you to see former **quarry workers' cottages** and the historic **wind-pump tower**, while nature lovers may also note some distinctive **wild flowers** and **bird life** along the route.

Castletown itself is an attractive village on the fringes of **Dunnet Bay**, roughly halfway between Thurso and the Castle of Mey, and offers a good standard of hotel accommodation.



Castlehill Heritage Centre.
Photo: Neil Buchan / Castletown Heritage Society

Castlehill Heritage Centre

Harbour Road, Castletown, KW14 8TG

THE HISTORY OF CASTLETOWN VILLAGE AND OLRIK PARISH

- Themed exhibitions, displays
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- Archaeology w/shops: survey, field works and finds analysis
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- Adjacent to picturesque and historic harbour with scenic views of Dunnet Head and Bay
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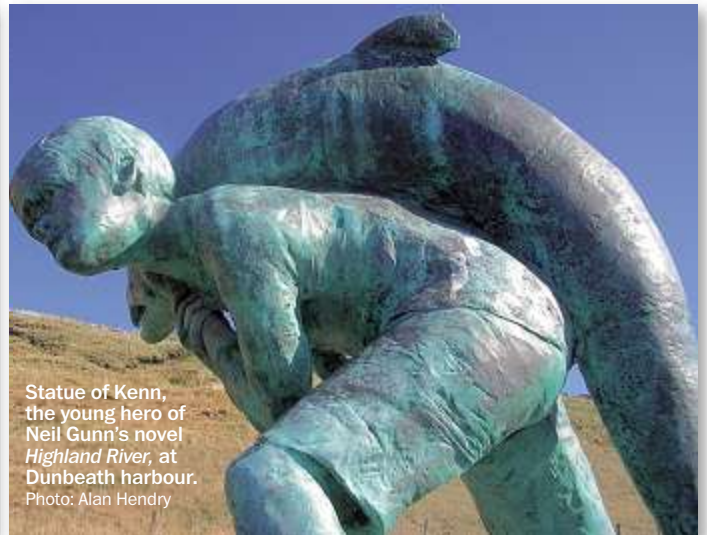
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Dunbeath



Dunbeath Strath runs through an alluring landscape. Photo: Alan Hendry



Statue of Kenn, the young hero of Neil Gunn's novel *Highland River*, at Dunbeath harbour. Photo: Alan Hendry

D

UNBEATH has a literary claim to fame as the home village of **Neil Gunn**, one of the most important Scottish authors

of the 20th century. Its alluring landscape of sea, harbour, river and strath inspired such acclaimed novels as *Highland River* and *The Silver Darlings*.

The old school building where Gunn was a pupil over 100 years ago now serves as the **local heritage centre**, run by **Dunbeath Preservation Trust**. This is the focal point for the area's wealth of cultural and natural history, and a recent extension showcases

some of the area's archaeological treasures. The centre has been awarded full museum status by the **Museums and Galleries Commission**.

Gunn's legacy is given due prominence and visitors can see the **old Corona typewriter** on which his wife **Daisy** transcribed the author's manuscripts. The main exhibition area features a floor-map based on the winding **Dunbeath Water** – immortalised in Gunn's *Highland River*.

Here the visitor can share the author's sense of wonder at a buzzard circling above: "From high overhead the river in its strath must look like a mighty serpent, the tip of

its tail behind the mountain, its open mouth to the sea."

The bright colours of the floor-map are offset by a series of huge **black-and-white photographic prints** representing a journey to the source of the river: the remote **Loch Braigh na h-Aibhne**. One side of the main exhibition room is dominated by a blue glass installation incorporating elements of Dunbeath's natural environment and the imprint made by the earliest human inhabitants.

Lining up below a giant photographic image of **Wag Hill** is a tableau of three-dimensional figures representing key periods in local history, from **Norse invader to herring fisherman**.

They are known collectively as "Shadows of My Past".

Taking pride of place in the extension are **Neolithic, Bronze Age and Viking-era artefacts** on loan from National Museums Scotland. Also on display are trophies from the **Dunbeath Highland Games**, a panel of **old school photographs** and a replica of the **Dunbeath Castle yett** (gate), while the extension houses a **museum archive store** and a **research room**.

Another floor-map has been laid out in stone in the shape of an **Iron Age "wag"**, while nearby are two strikingly **colourful stained-glass windows** designed by **Edinburgh artist Kate Henderson**. One is an interpretation of an **eighth-century brooch**, while the other is inspired by various historical texts relating to Dunbeath.

There are many **books** for sale on subjects of local interest, including archaeology.

The centre's elevated position offers sweeping views of the village and the strath: **the house where Neil Gunn was born**, the **mill**, the **Dunbeath Broch**, **Chapel Hill** (site of an early monastery known

as the House of Peace) and distant **Cnoc na Maranaich** with its lonely standing stone.

Events based at Dunbeath Heritage Centre include the **Neil Gunn "Light in the North" festival** in November and guided walks.

The preservation trust owns and maintains a number of historic buildings including the **harbour storehouses**, **bothy** and **ice house** which provide a lasting reminder of the village's role in the **19th-century herring boom**.

Dunbeath Heritage Centre (www.dunbeath-heritage.org.uk) is open every day except Saturday from

10am to 5pm between April and September, and Monday to Friday from 11am to 3pm the rest of the year. There is a modest entry fee, with children admitted free of charge.

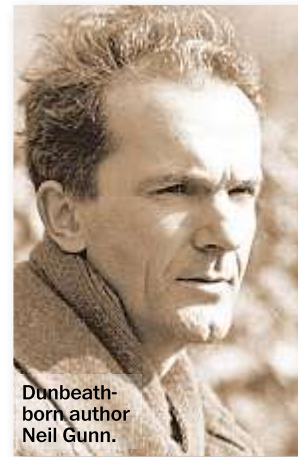
The centre is just off the A9 in the village of Dunbeath and is clearly signposted from the main road.

Enter a bygone era of rural life by visiting

Laidhay Croft Museum, just north of Dunbeath. Within these sturdy whitewashed walls, under a **rush-thatched roof**, there are countless reminders of the far north's rich rural heritage.

The building dates back to a time when crofting families and their livestock coexisted in close proximity, and indeed the **Laidhay "longhouse"** incorporates both stable and byre. On display are **dairy utensils**, **horse harness** and other equipment that would have been essential to the running of the croft. The house contains traditional **box-beds** as well as furniture, linen and small but equally fascinating artefacts from a long-lost way of life.

There is ample parking space and a **tearoom**. Laidhay is open daily from June until the end of October, with a small admission charge.



Dunbeath-born author Neil Gunn.

DUNBEATH HERITAGE CENTRE

At Dunbeath's Heritage Centre you will find a new, engaging approach to landscape interpretation. Through art installations, photography and our unique 'floor map', you can explore our rich historical, archaeological and literary landscape, and make a pilgrimage of discovery along the 'Highland River' made famous by Dunbeath-born novelist Neil M Gunn.

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www.dunbeath-heritage.org.uk Tel: 01593 731233
 Open: April - September: Sunday - Friday
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'a major contribution to Scottish culture'



Heavy athletes lining up for the 2012 Halkirk Highland Games. Photo: Ann-Marie Jones / Northern Studios



Highland Games

FOR a truly traditional Scottish day out there's nothing to beat the **kilt-swinging, bagpipe-skirling, caber-tossing** excitement of the **Highland Games**.

And it's a source of pride to Caithness that the biggest and **best annual gathering in the north** of Scotland is held in the village of **Halkirk**.

Every July the **Halkirk Highland**

Games attracts crowds of up to **5,000** to see kilted strongmen battling it out for **big-money prizes** in the traditional **heavy events**, from **tossing the caber** to **putting the shot**, as well as the eagerly anticipated **eight-man tug-of-war contest**.

Halkirk's senior status on the games circuit is such that it stages **two Scottish national championship events** – throwing the **28lb weight** for distance and the **2,000 metres cycle race** – and

world records have been created there in the **22lb hammer** and **56lb weight** for height.

Aside from the heavyweights there's **Highland dancing, piping, athletics, cycling, clay pigeon shooting, novelty races, a baby show...** and the bonus of not one but **two clan gatherings!**

Halkirk hosts the annual get-togethers of clans **Gunn** and **Sinclair**, and both have **hospitality**

tents at the games where holidaymakers with Caithness roots might just find some clues to their Gunn or Sinclair ancestors.

The **2013 Halkirk Highland Games** will be held on Saturday July 27.

Look out too for the **Mey Games**, with its royal connections.

SOME of the **finest trout lochs** in northern Scotland are just waiting to be discovered amid the beautiful, gently rolling landscape of Caithness.

The quality of the fishing in these **scattered, sparkling waters** is rivalled only by the scenic surroundings and the pleasing **sense of solitude** awaiting you.

Once you've been kitted out with tackle and been allocated a boat, you can take advantage of **expert advice** and instruction from local **instructors and ghillies**.

Local angling writer **Bruce Sandison** has sung the praises of far north fisheries in many of his books. "Few areas in Europe can match the diversity and quality of trout fishing in Caithness and north Sutherland," he maintains. "There is an endless array of wonderful lochs set amid some of the most dramatic scenery in Scotland."

He describes **Loch Watten** as "one of Scotland's finest fisheries". Located in the heart of the county, Watten is a shallow, **marl loch** some three miles long and up to half a mile wide.

The nearby **Loch Scarmclate** is effectively a nursery for its more famous neighbour. Other well-known trout waters in Caithness include **Calder** (the **county's**



Sunset over Loch Watten, one of the north's best trout lochs.

Photo: Alan Hendry

Angling

largest and deepest loch), near Halkirk; **Toftingall**, not far from Watten; **St John's**, near Dunnet; and, a few miles farther south, **Loch Heilen**.

Traditional "loch-style" fishing is the preferred method locally, with teams of two to four wet flies employed on a **fast retrieved floating line**. There's also the

option of **dry fly angling** on a floating line with a slower retrieve.

When boat fishing, "**dapping**" a large single dry fly on a long rod can sometimes bring success.

For most of the Caithness trout waters, a **light carbon-fibre 9-10ft rod** with tip to middle action will be the best choice. Traditional flies recommended in this area

include the **Zulu, Soldier Palmer, Ke He, Wickham's Fancy, Butcher** and **Kate McLaren**.

Caithness is also a popular choice for sea anglers, venturing into the unpredictable **Pentland Firth** or the wide expanse of **Dunnet Bay**, and salmon anglers who might try their luck on the **Thurso, Forss** and **Wick rivers**.

The beautiful beach at Durness.
Picture: Elizabeth-Anne Mackay / NorthView

Days Away in Sutherland

T

HERE'S a lot of history to discover in **Sutherland** – 3,000 million years of it, in fact.

That's how old the rocks are in the **North West Highlands Geopark**, a craggy, mountainous landscape that has been described as one of the last truly wild places in Europe.

You can investigate the remarkable geology of the far north-west in a family-friendly way at the **Knockan Crag earth science site**. Nearby, south of **Inchnadamph**, a short walk up a limestone valley will lead you to the **Bone Caves** – an ancient series of caverns where the bones of **polar bears, reindeer, wolves and arctic foxes** have been discovered, relics of the Ice Age.

Assynt Visitor Centre at **Lochinver** sets the scene for the fascinating geology and remarkable wildlife of the area and has CCTV cameras on a local **heronry**.

Up on the north coast there's another famous cave, one that has helped establish **Durness** as an enduringly popular holiday destination. **Smoo Cave** has an entrance 100ft wide and a wooden walkway allows you to view an inner chamber where the **Allt Smoo burn** falls from a gap in the roof. There are **boat tours** of Smoo Cave throughout the summer.

Durness boasts a beautiful stretch of golden sands, while the delightful diversity of **Balnakeil Craft Village** adds to the area's appeal. There's also a **John Lennon memorial garden** commemorating the former Beatle's connection with Durness; Lennon spent many childhood holidays there and it is thought to have been the inspiration for his song "**In My Life**", lyrics from which are featured in a set of three **standing stones** within the garden.

Along the coast at **Strathnaver Museum** you can learn about the infamous **Sutherland Clearances** of the early 19th century when families were forced from the land to make way for sheep-farming. The museum (open from April to October; closed Sundays) is also the starting point for the **Strathnaver Trail**, linking **29 archaeological sites** ranging from **Neolithic cairns** to **pre-Clearance townships**.

All along the north coast there are wonderful **beaches**, including those at **Bettyhill, Coldbackie, Melvich** and **Strathy**.

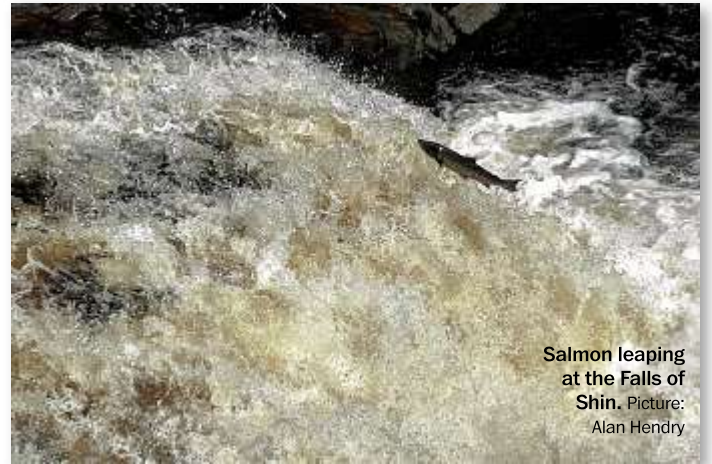
Lochinver and **Kinlochbervie** are attractive **fishing villages** on the west coast but the principal communities of this vast, sparsely populated county are located over in the east.

The **Royal Burgh of Dornoch** – Sutherland's only town – is famed for its **championship golf course**, which has been rated among the **top 20 in the world**. Dornoch's other attractions include its **13th-century cathedral**, its **courthouse** and **old town jail** (now a gallery and craft shop) and its **award-winning sandy beach**.

Dominating the landscape around **Golspie** is a huge statue of the **1st Duke of Sutherland** – known locally as "the Mannie" – on the summit of the 1,300ft **Ben Bhraggie**.

Past meets present here as **Highland Wildcat mountain-bike trails** have been developed in the surrounding landscape, giving a big boost to activity-based tourism in the process. Indeed, Highland Wildcat has been voted the best destination in Britain by a leading mountain-bike magazine.

Just outside Golspie, the fairytale **Dunrobin Castle** – resembling a French chateau with its conical spires – stands above a **magnificent garden**



Salmon leaping at the Falls of Shin. Picture: Alan Hendry



The interior of Dunrobin Castle. Picture: Alan Hendry

that took its inspiration from the **Palace of Versailles** near Paris. Dunrobin has **189 rooms** and is one of Britain's oldest continuously inhabited houses, dating back to the early 1300s. It was home to the earls and, later, the **dukes of Sutherland**.

Away from the grandeur of the castle's interior, there is a **museum** within the grounds containing an intriguing mix of

safari souvenirs, archaeological relics and other artefacts. Visitors to Dunrobin can also watch **falconry displays**.

Not far from Dunrobin, signposted on the other side of the A9, is the **Big Burn** – a short walking route through woodland and up a gorge, ending in a **waterfall**.

At **Brora**, the village heritage centre has exhibits on the local

Translocation 1813-2013

Bicentenary of the Kildonan Clearances

Kildonan Riots

New Museum Displays

Longhouse Excavation

and Virtual Reconstruction

Shinty Match

Sock Sampler

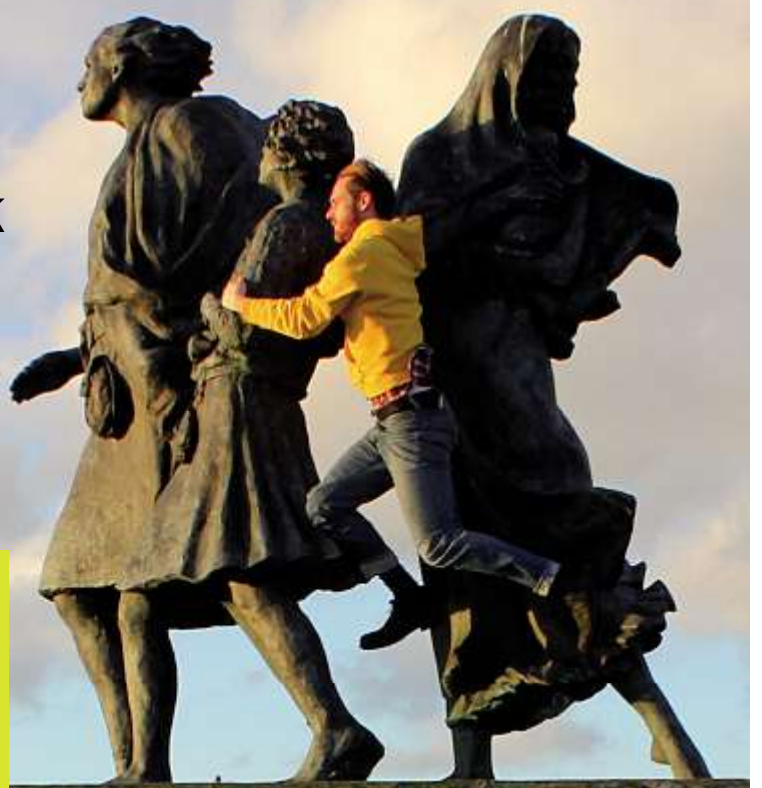
Translocation Festival 2-18 August

Commemoration of Kildonan Clearances

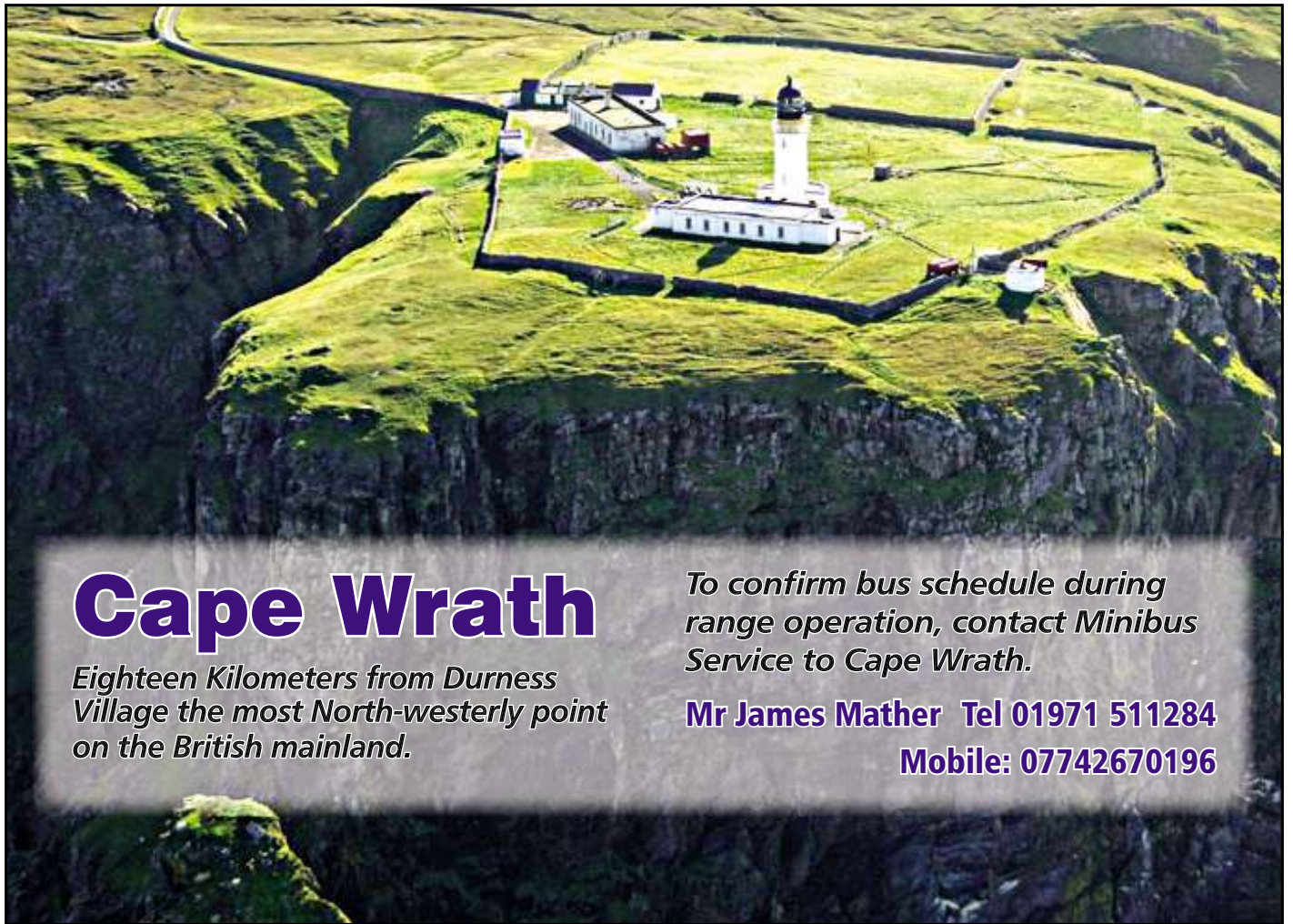
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Dunrobin Castle and gardens.



whisky, coal and wool industries as well as a display by **Clyne Heritage Society**.

Continuing north, the **Timespan heritage museum and arts centre** in **Helmsdale** has historical exhibits, a **storytelling room**, a **gallery**, a **riverside café** and a **garden of herbs and flowers**.

You can discover the intriguing story of the **1868 gold rush** in the nearby **Strath of Kildonan** and find out more about the **19th-century Clearances**.

Timespan and the Helmsdale community will be commemorating the bicentenary of the **Kildonan clearances** in a special project this August.

Sutherland's inland attractions include the **Falls of Shin Visitor Centre** which features high-quality

shopping, a **restaurant**, **walking trails** and a viewing platform to see **salmon leaping** in season.

At **Forsinard**, a visitor centre run by the RSPB provides information on the **peatlands** and **bog pools** of Caithness and Sutherland and the rare species found in this internationally important habitat. Visitors can venture into the **Flow Country** on the **Dubh Lochan Trail**, a circular route made out of flagstones which takes you across part of the moor. A self-guided leaflet is available.

The far north peatlands are studded with shining bog pools – **dubh lochans** – where **bogbean flowers** bloom in spring. The vast moorland is covered in **bog mosses** and **lichens**, with the beautifully scented **bog myrtle** on drier areas and carnivorous plants

Get close to puffins on Handa island.



Dunrobin Castle, Golspie. Picture: Alan Hendry

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Helmsdale with its prominent statue, The Emigrants.

Photos: Alan Hendry



such as **sundew** and **butterwort** waiting to attract passing insects.

The birdlife is equally abundant, with species such as **golden plover**, **hen harrier** and **greenshank** breeding there during the summer. Look out too for **dippers** and **dunlin**.

The best way to understand what the peatlands are all about, and to see the plants, bird habitats and creepy-crawlies up close, is to join RSPB staff on one of their **guided walks** during the summer season.

Forsinard is alongside the A897 Helmsdale/Melvich road and is on the railway line between Wick/Thurso and Inverness.

Other aspects of the Sutherland environment can be explored at **Lairg**, where the **Ord Archaeological Trail** covers **Bronze Age house sites**, **Neolithic cairns** and evidence of **medieval cultivation**. The **Ferrycroft Visitor Centre** further examines man's influence on the land.

Sandwood Bay is reputed to be the most remote beach on mainland Britain – but those willing to set off on the **four-mile hike** across the moorland are rewarded by the sight of one of the most beautiful expanses of shoreline in the whole of the Highlands.

The **mile-long stretch of sand**, guarded by the **tall sea-stack of Am Buachaille**, lies about five miles south of Cape Wrath on Sutherland's remote north-west coast. The bay is part of the **Sandwood Estate**, owned and managed by the wild land conservation charity the **John Muir Trust**.

The walk to Sandwood begins at **Blairmore**, north-west of Kinlochbervie on the single-track B801, where there is a parking area. The route goes past the freshwater Sandwood Loch, tucked behind the dunes.

Various legends and mysteries are associated with Sandwood. A local farmer claimed to have

encountered a **mermaid** there in 1900, while the **ghost of a sailor** from a shipwrecked **Spanish Armada galleon** was said to appear on stormy nights, knocking on the windows of an old cottage above the bay.

The village of **Scourie**, in the parish of **Eddrachilles**, is an ideal base for exploring the far north-west.

It is said that **palm trees**, **Highland cattle** and **red-throated** and **black-throated divers** can all be seen from the foreshore here, depending on the season – giving Scourie a unique claim to fame!

Just off the coast lies **Handa Island**, one of Britain's most important breeding grounds for a range of seabirds including **puffins**, **guillemots**, **fulmars**, **razorbills** and **skuas**.

Until the 1840s Handa had more than 60 residents, but the **1848 potato famine** led to migration to Canada for many islanders and it has generally remained uninhabited ever since.

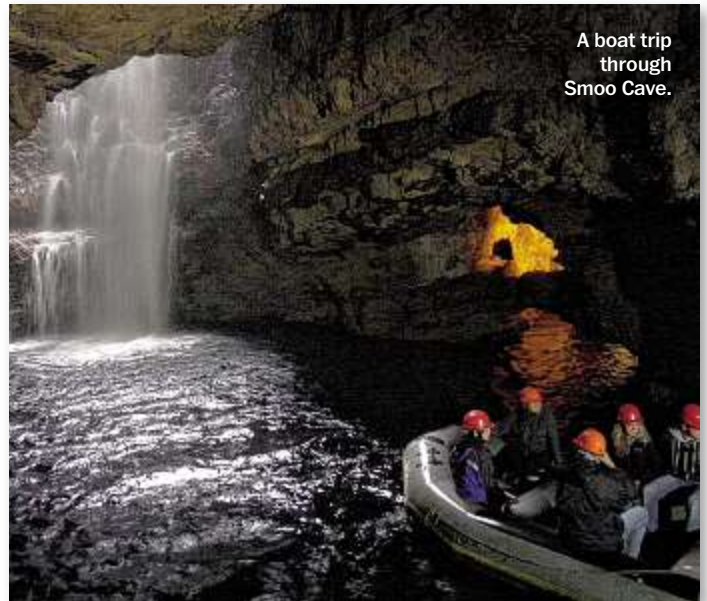
The island is a **Scottish Wildlife Trust nature reserve** and it is manned throughout the summer by volunteer wardens who base themselves in the island's small bothy. Visitors can reach Handa via a boat service from Tarbet, near Scourie.

The stunning **North West Highlands Geopark** forms part of a worldwide network of territories defined by their outstanding geological features, forward-thinking communities and unique natural heritage.

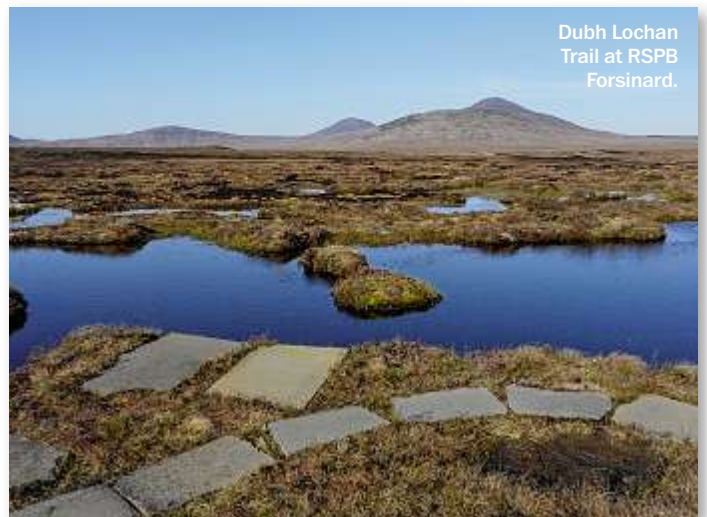
The geopark takes in around **2000 square kilometres of mountain, peatland, beach, forest** and **coastline** from Wester Ross to the north coast of Sutherland.

Its eastern boundary follows the **Moine Thrust zone**, an internationally significant geological structure that helped 19th-century geologists understand how the world's great mountain ranges were formed.

A boat trip through Smoo Cave.



Dubh Lochan Trail at RSPB Forsinard.



Falconry displays at Dunrobin Castle.

Find out more about the geopark at www.northwest-highlands-geopark.org.uk

The area contains **Knockan Crag**, giving an insight into one of the oldest landscapes in Europe. It

is situated some 13 miles north of **Ullapool**. Find out more at www.knockan-crag.co.uk

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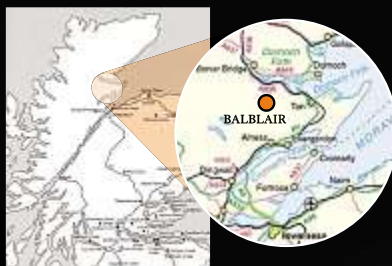
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Orkney Islands Council

We operates three well maintained hostels in Orkney. The Hoy Centre and Rackwick Hostel are located on the island of Hoy and the Birsay Hostel is located on the Orkney Mainland.

There are two camping and caravan sites on the Orkney Mainland, one at the Birsay Hostel and one at the Point of Ness in Stromness. Both are suitable for tents, caravans and motor homes




For bookings please contact
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The Old Man of Hoy. Picture: David Woods / Fotolia



Days Away in Orkney

ORKNEY is within easy reach of Caithness, with regular sailings across the **Pentland Firth** – either by passenger ferry from John O’Groats or on one of the two vehicle ferries that operate out of **Scrabster** and **Gills Bay**.

Those who venture onto its shores will be rewarded with an unforgettable range of experiences, from the mysteries of the ancient past to the lively culture of its modern-day communities.

You can explore more than **5,000 years of history** at **Skara Brae** and other **prehistoric sites** before fast-forwarding to the present and immersing yourself in the islands’ renowned hospitality – whether attending one of the **annual music festivals** or simply enjoying the crack in a **cosy pub** or at a **ceilidh**.

Orkney is an **archipelago of about 70 islands**, 21 of which are inhabited and linked by a network of ferry services. The combination of **spectacular scenery, friendly people, abundant wildlife** and **outstanding natural produce** makes it an **ideal holiday destination**.

The principal communities of **Kirkwall** and **Stromness** are on the **Orkney Mainland**. **Kirkwall**, the capital, is dominated by the red sandstone edifice of **St Magnus Cathedral**, founded in 1137, where the **islands’ own saint** was buried after being treacherously slain by his cousin.

The nearby **Orkney Museum** at **Tankerness House** tells the story of the islands from the Stone Age to the 21st century. The **museum** has a large **photographic archive** and a programme of temporary exhibitions.

The **Pickaquoey Centre** is Orkney’s largest community and

leisure facility. It plays host to an impressive range of **arts festivals, musical events, exhibitions, conferences and sporting competitions**, providing enjoyment for all ages and abilities.

Kirkwall is also the home of the **multi-award-winning Highland Park malt whisky**, and the distillery – the most northerly in the world – has its own **visitor centre**.

The smaller town of **Stromness** is full of charm, with its narrow streets and its excellent museum packed with maritime exhibits, while the **Pier Arts Centre** is a focal point for the local artistic community.

With acclaimed **jewellery, knitting and weaving, pottery, designer knitwear** and **traditional furniture**, the arts and crafts inspired by the Orkney landscape and culture have a special quality.

Long before the Egyptians built their Pyramids, the **Ring of Brodgar**, the **Standing Stones of Stenness** and the **burial cairn of Maeshowe** were all constructed on the Orkney Mainland. In a massive feat of engineering, the entrance of **Maeshowe** was sited so that on the shortest day of the year the sun would enter the cairn’s main passage and strike the back wall.

The settlement of **Skara Brae** near the **Bay of Skail** is another prehistoric wonder, uncovered during a storm in 1850. Sand had preserved a series of workshops and houses furnished in Stone Age fashion with **beds, shelves, dressers and tables**. There are eight dwellings altogether, linked by a series of covered passages. Radiocarbon dating has confirmed that the settlement dates from the **late Neolithic period**.

Visitors to **Skara Brae** can also tour the carefully restored **Skail House**, a mansion containing



The Stromness waterfront. Picture: Kevin George / Fotolia



The Italian Chapel on Lamb Holm.



The prehistoric village of Skara Brae.

many items collected during the lives of the **12 lairds of Skail**.

Skara Brae was awarded **World Heritage Site** status along with **Maeshowe** and other important sites in the area, known collectively as **Orkney’s Neolithic Heartland**.

Other attractions in Orkney include the Iron Age settlement and **broch at Gurness**, the **Tomb of the Eagles on South Ronaldsay** and the beautiful little **Italian Chapel at Lamb Holm**.

The chapel was painstakingly assembled from scrap material during **World War Two** by **Italian prisoners**, and the story of its

construction is a truly inspiring one.

The south islands of **Lamb Holm, Burray, Glims Holm** and **South Ronaldsay** were joined by a series of **causeways** known as the **Churchill Barriers** because of the German threat to the British fleet based at Scapa Flow, Orkney’s massive natural anchorage.

You can discover more about the islands’ vital wartime role in the **Scapa Flow Visitor Centre** at **Lyness** on **Hoy**.

On the other side of this island is the **Old Man of Hoy**, Orkney’s most distinctive natural feature – a **spectacular 449ft sea-stack**. Hoy takes its name from the Old Norse for “high island” and **some of the biggest cliffs in Britain** can be found here, along with Orkney’s highest point at **Ward Hill**.

Close to the bouldery shore of **Rackwick Bay** is a rock-cut tomb known as the **Dwarfie Stane**, similar to Neolithic or Bronze Age tombs around the Mediterranean.

The outer islands are well worth a visit as each has its own character.

To the north there’s **Shapinsay, Rousay, Egilsay, Wyre, Westray, Eday, Sanday, Stronsay, Papa Westray** and **North Ronaldsay**, while to the south of the Mainland you’ll find **Graemsay** and **Flotta** as well as **Hoy**.

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