



Winter Adventures in Scotland and England



This winter the weather in the Far North of the Scottish Highlands was rather dreich. Dreich is one of a number of Scottish words for wet weather. If you aren't familiar with the dialect, let me share with you some of these words:

- **Dreich** — Wet, dull, gloomy, dismal, dreary or any combination of these. Scottish weather at its most miserable.
- **Drookit** — Extremely wet, drenched, from an Old Norse word meaning drowned.
- **Fret** — A cold, wet mist from the sea.
- **Oorlich** — Damp, chilly and unpleasant, raw, bleak, depressing.
- **Plowetery** — Messy, dirty and wet.
- **Smirr** — Drizzle.
- **Snell** — The most biting of wet weather, the type that you can feel right down to the bone.
- **Stoating** — When heavy rain bounces off the ground.
- **Sneet** — Wintry mix changing back and forth between snow and sleet

There were several ranger walks scheduled this winter in the Far North, and I signed up to join them, for exercise and for the scenery. While it may rain a lot, there is absolutely nothing more glorious than Scotland in good weather. That is why it is said that a Scotsman is the only person who would be homesick in heaven. Fortunately, these walks happened to fall mostly on nice days. The first was a walk along the Armadale Gorge, through which flows the Armadale Burn. It began at a parking lot by an old stone bridge.



Along the walk were some very scenic views of the gorge.



Then we reached the perpetually wet ground of Britain's largest peat bog, known up here as The Flow Country, where the water table is essentially at ground level, so you are always squishing along.



Along the way, we passed the foundations of a number of shielings. A shieling was a hut, used 150-200 years ago, commonly found in wild or lonely places in the hills and mountains of Scotland where sheep and cattle were brought for the summer grazing.

We also found the foundations of hut circles, which were stone and thatch living structures from the 2nd century BC, so roughly 4000 years ago. And we passed the ruins of a broch, shown in the next photo. Brochs date from approximately 2-4 thousand years ago, and were large stone structures, often 40 feet tall, in which a number of families lived together. These were often built in protective locations and this one was perched on the top of the gorge, where the yellow arrow indicates. The next photo is a close-up of the ruins.



This next photo is a peat cutting. The Far North of the Highlands was one of the last places in Britain to get connected to the electric grid, and peat from The Flow Country was the fuel of choice for heating here in the Far North. In fact, some of the very rural cottages still use it.

The next ranger walk began in The Flow Country, as shown in the next two pictures. You might think the burns (streams) and lochans (ponds) would collect the water that drains off of the bog. But it does not work that way. The peat is so dense that it holds water all the time,..... everywhere.....even on the side of the hills. No matter where you walk in The Flow Country, low or high, even on the top of a ridge, you find yourself squishing through wet peat.



These next photos are of the Rabbit Islands, which sit in the Kyle of Tongue, a shallow sea loch that leads to the village of Tongue. Local legend is that several

generations ago, the Laird of this region loved to eat rabbit pie, and so these islands were populated with wild rabbits. With no stoats, or foxes or other land-bourne predators, and with no access except by water, the rabbits flourished. And thus, there were plenty available to trap for dinner.



Here is another shieling, with more structure left than the one on the last walk, so a better photo.



The next islands are known as Eilean Nan Ron, and they once supported a small crofting community. Now only the ruins remain, visible in the distance.



Imagine that the lady of the croft and the young children would live in this, during the summer months, up high in the hills with the livestock, while her husband and older children would tend the crops back at the croft (next photo).



The coast line on this walk was typical of the Far North. We are surrounded by ruggedly beautiful coastline, including the ones shown here, which are known locally as the Sleiteil Rocks.



I saw two interesting forms of lichen growing on the walks. The first is either beard lichen or bushy lichen, and stands out quite a bit from the rocks it grows on. The next is known as devil's matchstick, for obvious reasons.



The next hike was just before Christmas. It climbed up Ben Dorrey, and then went cross-country across more of The Flow Country, where we saw more interesting lichens and mosses.



We came across a lone standing stone. The northern Highlands have many stone circles and arrays, and even more lone standing stones, left by the local residents of thousands of years ago. One might wonder how you tell whether this is a true standing stone, erected by the ancients, as opposed to a stone which just happens to be vertical as left by nature.



Well, first of all, there aren't a lot of natural stones just sticking up out of the bog of The Flow Country. But secondly, the erected standing stones actually sit on a foundation, made from smaller stones, set into the ground so as to stabilize the large standing stone at its base. So an erected standing stone has some engineering work to keep it upright.

We also visited the remains of a bronze age hill fort. It sits atop Beinn Freiceadain. Beinn is the Gaelic word for a large hill or mountain. Ben is the Anglicized version of that word, and is what almost all mountains in Scotland are called. In this case, Beinn Freiceadain means "watching hill," and indeed, this fort, atop the hill, would have been an excellent observation position, as well as an excellent defensive position.

The top of the hill once held a fairly extensive structure, which is now nothing but rubble in the peat. However, hikers have dug up a few of the stones and constructed a modern cairn.



As you descend the hill, and look back up, you can see why the fort would have been a good place to defend, as attackers would have had to climb this slope while under fire from above.



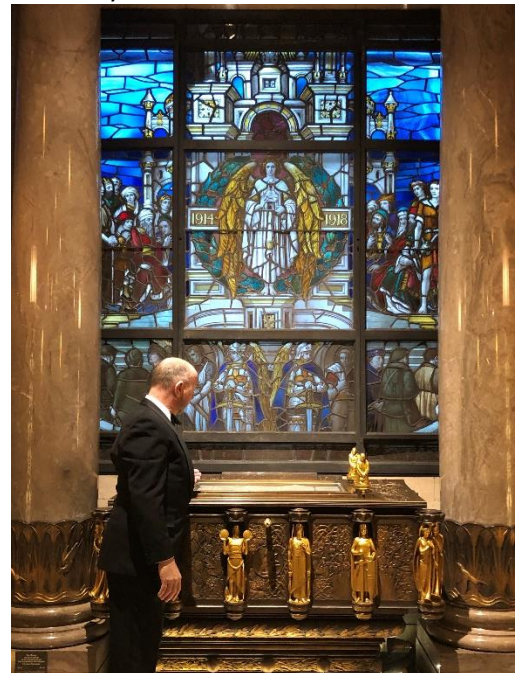
Additionally, a barrier wall was constructed all around the hill, about half way up the slope. Here you can get a sense of what it would have been like to have to climb over this embankment, going uphill, while under fire from stones and spears thrown at you from above. There were a few small openings in the wall, which would have made it easier for the defenders of the hill to get up and down during more peaceful times. This photo shows one of these small breaks, or gaps, along with a single stone excavated from the wall, which would likely have been one side of the gate, rather than a ceremonial standing stone. That is a bit of guesswork by archeologists, as it is a bit difficult to sort out exactly what the denizens of the Highlands were thinking a few thousand years ago.



I was honored to be invited to present a lecture at London's Freemason's Hall. The building, constructed in 1927, is huge, as you can tell in this picture of the main entrance.



Inside, there is a beautiful alter containing a book with the names of all of the Masonic Brothers who gave their lives in the World Wars. You can mechanically turn the pages and find your lost Masonic relatives



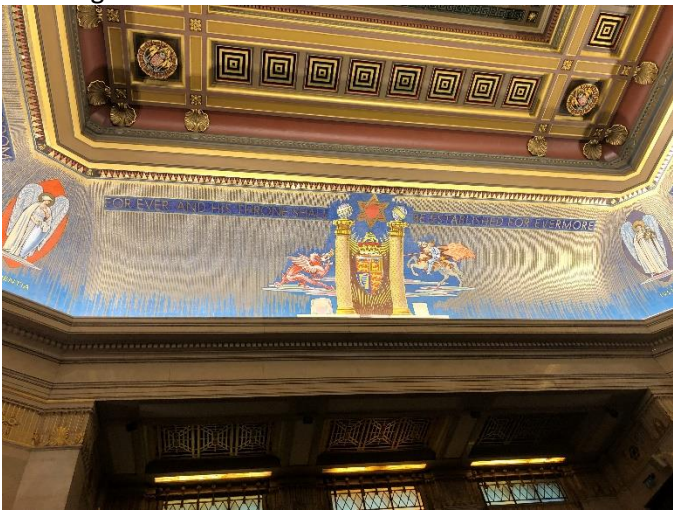
The Grand Temple room can seat over 2000. The next photo is of the doors to the temple, each of which weigh over a ton. They are so well hung, that you can push them open with the mere touch of a finger.



Inside, the room is simply amazing. Here are some pictures, including one of the four mosaic panels in the ceiling made of an incredible number of tiny mosaic pieces.



This mosaic is very English, and is of Saint George and the Dragon.



My hosts for the London meeting also toured me around the county of Kent. Rochester was one town that we visited. It has been kept in a very Victorian style, including the bridge over the River Medway.

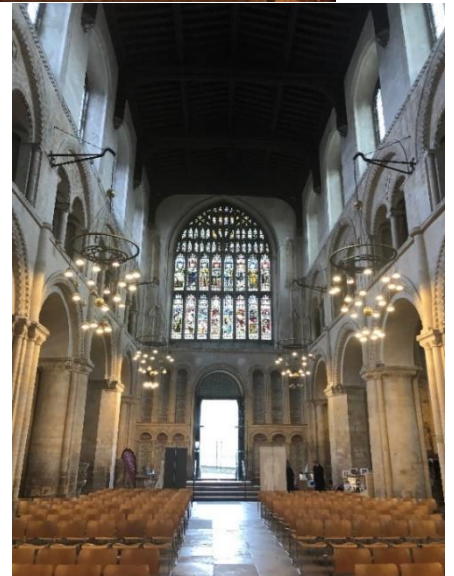


The buildings in the old part of town definitely harken back to the time when Charles Dickens lived nearby.





There is a century-old Catalpa tree right outside the cathedral, founded by the Normans in the year 604, pictures of which follow.



The Chapter Doorway, dating from 1350, leads to a library containing some incredible old manuscripts



Rochester served as an inspiration for a number of locations in Charles Dickens' novels. This building was the Nun's House in The Mystery of Edwin Drood.

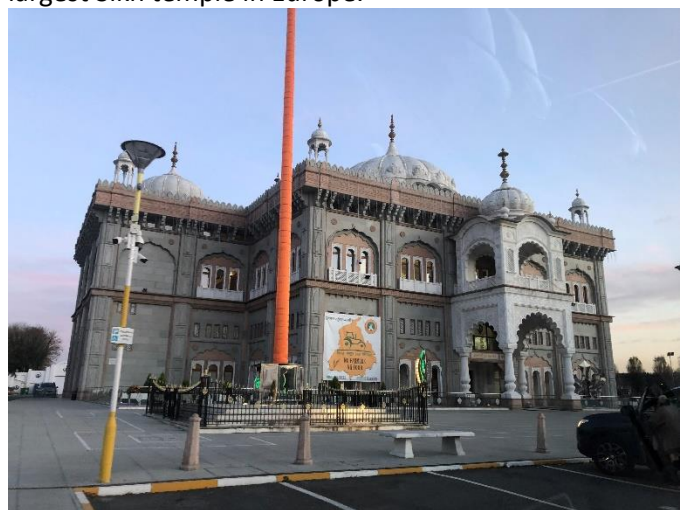


And this house, now operated as a private school, was Dickens' house.



I also toured the town of Gravesend, home to the largest Sikh temple in Europe.

Across the street, Rochester Castle, dating from the 12th century, is the best preserved Norman castle in Britain.



Gravesend has many unique downtown structures like the central clock tower shown here.



This is St. George's church, the burial site of the famous Indian princess, Pocahontas, notable for her assistance to the first white settlers at Jamestown in the New World. A monument to her stands in the church yard.



Floating in the River Thames, was a very unique lighthouse ship, which could be sent out into the mouth of the river to mark shoals for incoming ships, when necessary.



Gravesend is positioned on the south bank of the Thames, nearer the mouth of the river. Thus, it is well positioned for a defensive fortress, to keep invading ships from sailing up the river to London. New Tavern Fort, was constructed for this purpose, and still stands alongside the river. A similar fortress once stood opposite, on the north side of the Thames, but has not been preserved.



Guns from the Napoleonic Wars up through World War 2 are still in position overlooking the river.



One last photo from my London Masonic trip, for any Harry Potter fans, I found this in Kings Cross Station when I got off my train.



Back home in Caithness, Wendy, dawg and I went on a hill walk with three unique features. The first was crossing the old Ord Road, which once upon a time was the only road into Caithness and was considered the most dangerous road in Scotland. It ran literally along the cliff edge of the Ord of Caithness, which is the mountain seen from the trail in this photo.



The second thing on this walk was the ruined village of Borg. It became the home of poor crofters who found that resistance was futile when their land was assimilated into the large estates during the Highland Clearances (sorry Star Trek fans – I couldn't resist the play on words).



The third thing on the walk was the Oursdale Broch. I have mentioned brochs, as they were common in the Far North.



The first photo is from the outside, showing the entrance and the second is taken from the walls, looking down into the insides, and the other side of the entrance.



There was a storage closet built into the wall to the right of the entrance.



There were a number of other side cavities and small rooms, and a stairway in the wall leading up to where the second story would have been.



Walking along the beach I found a sea potato.....the shell of a sea urchin. And a mermaid's purse.....the egg sack of a ray or a skate.

I took another ranger hike that followed the Borge River to the ocean and visited one of the Far North's lovely beaches. You could easily have convinced yourself that it was a Caribbean beach.....until you turned around and saw the snow on the mountains behind.



The hike then headed up the hill. We were told there was another broch at the top of this hill if we climbed it.

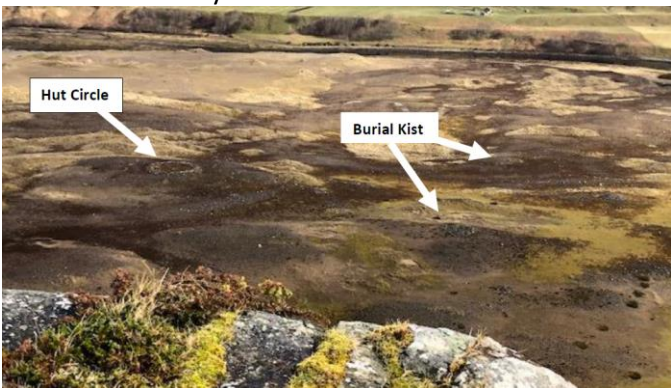




And we found it.



It was much smaller than the other brochs I have visited. This one apparently was just built as a watch tower, rather than living accommodations. The village was built on the level ground below. Looking over the wall of the broch you could see remains of it.



That included the base wall of a hut circle. These had a stone wall about 3 feet high, then a sod wall for another 3 feet, then poles that leaned in toward the center, much like an American Indian teepee. Three or four families would have lived together in it. Here is a closer view of the remains.



There were also several burial kists. These are less substantial than the burial cairns that are found around Caithness. The kists (or cists) are simply a pile of stones with a few hollow spaces where bodies would have been buried. The next few pictures show this better.





The snow may have been on the ground during this last hike, but the golden gorse was pointing the way toward spring. In Scotland it has long been said that you could only kiss your sweetheart when the gorse is in bloom. Of course, in six years of living here, I have never found a time of year that you cannot find at least some of the gorse in flower. But April through June is when the hills are a glorious golden color with it fully in bloom.



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

I found another of the Far North’s Pictish stones. This one is called the Priest’s Stone and is believed to have marked the grave of a respected early Christian leader after the Picts began to convert to Christianity. You can faintly see the Pictish cross carved into the stone.

