

“Tour of Scotland” – May 2013

by Ormond Smith

This tour of Scotland was arranged for visiting delegates to the 10th Grand Chapter and took place during and after this very fine event held in Inverness in May 2013. Despite the ungodly early start from Rouen, our French friends arrived safely around lunchtime on the Friday (10th) to be greeted by Dick Beach and were whisked from the Airport to the Waterside Hotel in Inverness to be welcomed by Connetable Nicol Manson. After lunch and some rest and/or “retail therapy”, the group were joined by local members for the evenings Welcome Party, also Urban and Irmhild Lamberty from Zeltingen-Rachtig and Don & Doris Weisman who, having arrived the previous day from Indianapolis in the US, had been enjoying a tour around Loch Ness.

The group had a free day on Saturday and decided to travel down to Drumnadrochit on Loch Ness side to have lunch (and a wee whisky tasting!) at Bailli Dick Beach’s Fiddlers Restaurant (www.fiddledrum.co.uk). By late afternoon they were ready for the evenings Ceremony of Induction at the Town Hall and the Chapitre which followed at the Drumossie Hotel (see separate report).

Tour organisers Nicol and Ormond had decided on a leisurely Sunday and a Hog Roast lunch was enjoyed by all at the Waterside before embarking on a coach to visit Cawdor Castle (www.cawdorcastle.com) near Inverness. Unknown to the visitors, Nicol had arranged for a welcome at the Castle gates by Angelika, the Dowager Countess Cawdor, (pictured centre right) owner of this prestigious castle. Were we all in for a surprise – not only did the Countess greet the group but she then gave a personally guided tour of the castle with commentary in perfect French!



For a Tour which was to encompass culture as it progressed, things could not have got off to a better start. There followed a short visit to Fort George, Europe’s largest military fort and home to the famous Black Watch 3rd Battalion, The Royal Regiment of Scotland. Almost a tradition now, the group enjoyed a curry in the evening at one of Inverness’s top Indian restaurants and were joined by our tour guide Catherine Ward who had just arrived in the Highland capital.

An early start on Monday morning saw us depart the Waterside Hotel by 8am for the first leg of the Tour, down the Great Glen and Ormond’s predictions of “changeable weather” for the following few days seemed entirely true as we encountered a heavy snow storm as we travelled south! Fortunately, the weather did improve and after a damp and windy visit to the famous Commando memorial at Gairloch (www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Commando_Memorial), we boarded the Jacobite Steam Train (www.westcoastrailways.co.uk) in Fort William in a burst of sunshine. The train journey to the West Coast fishing/ferry port of Mallaig can be done on a scheduled modern diesel train, but for a touch of



nostalgia, nothing can beat the magnificence and grandeur of a trip by steam train and many photographs were “snapped” whilst leaning out of the carriages as the train puffed its way up and around the steep curves, surrounded by quite spectacular mountain scenery, later to give way to the splendid coastal views as we neared Mallaig – beautiful beaches of silvery sand and the magical islands

of Rhum, Eigg and Skye over the white capped waves of the ocean. After a tasty lunch in Mallaig’s Steam Inn, of Steak Pie marinated in Isle of Skye ale with an Argentinian Merlot and followed by Cranachan (a traditional Scottish dessert made with



oats, cream, whisky and raspberries), it was back on board the train (also known as the Hogwarts Express in the Harry Potter films), for our return journey and a chance to once again photograph and savour the spectacular scenery. Our luxury coach then transported us down the West Coast with its views of the Scottish Islands and castles to Oban where we would spend our first night at the Oban Bay Hotel, looking out over Oban Bay and the Sound of Kerrera.



Dinner that evening was taken at the famed Waterfront Fishhouse Restaurant in the old Fisherman's Mission and the succulent seafood repast of crab timbale, followed by Isle of Mull hand dived Scallops (left) was perfectly accompanied by a South African Kleine Zalze Chenin Blanc from Stellenbosch. This most enjoyable menu was rounded off with a tangy lemon tart.

Tuesday morning dawned bright but with intermittent showers and we left Oban to travel through the scenic Pass of Brander and alongside Loch Awe, where a stop was made for photographs to be taken of Kilchurn Castle on an island in the loch.



Onward to the town of Inveraray and a visit to Inveraray Castle (www.inveraray-castle.com), home to the Duke of Argyll and his family. Built in the mid 18th century, this neo-Gothic styled castle was badly damaged by a devastating fire and water damage in 1975 but has been lovingly and sympathetically restored and is now a major tourist attraction.



The opulence of the State Rooms is extremely grand (left) as is the Armoury Hall with its impressive displays of 16th century pole-arms, 18th century muskets not to mention Lochaber axes and displays of broadswords. It was then onward to the restored Inveraray Jail (www.inverarayjail.co.uk) which was opened in 1820 and served as a jail and courthouse for the area. The jail closed in 1889 but the courthouse remained in operation until the mid 20th century.

Now restored, the building graphically displays the hardships experienced by prisoners of the period whilst the court room, well filled with characters and with a sound track of a trial makes for a compulsive visit. Despite threats by Hannah, (the children's warden) who was in charge of the exercise yard, our group managed to escape the building without incarceration!

From Inveraray, it was up and over the "Arrochar Alps" by way of the famed "Rest and be Thankful" pass (www.arrocharheritage.com) as we headed for our lunch halt at Ardlui at the head of Loch Lomond. The Drovers Inn (www.thedroversinn.co.uk) is so named after becoming a rest stop for the cattle drovers who would take their herds of cattle down to the markets in Glasgow in bygone days. The slightly decrepit exterior leads into an interior stuffed with different animals and birds, the atmosphere "oldie worldly" and full of character.....not to mention the grizzly bear in the hallway!! The lunch? Good, wholesome Hunters Chicken and a glass of Chilean Malbec.....mmm, tasty!

With the weather improving, our run down Loch Lomond was scenic and we eventually reached Auchentoshan Distillery (www.auchentoshan.com) on the outskirts of Glasgow for a tour and special tasting. The tour of the distillery was both most informative and interesting, culminating in a tasting of two of the whiskies in the range of five, all of which are triple distilled. The entry level "Classic", matured solely in American bourbon casks was both smooth and delicate with vanilla and coconut on the nose and palate, finishing with a fresh and floral zestiness.



The "Three Wood" which followed was rich and complex, having been matured in firstly bourbon casks, then transferred to Oloroso sherry casks for a period and finally into Pedro Ximinez sherry casks. The nose of brown sugar, oranges, plums and raisins leads into a mouth filling complexity of fruit and syrup, hazelnuts with hints of cinnamon and butterscotch, finishing with a rich and oak sweetness. Pour me a large one please!!!!!!

Once more onto our coach, we travelled down alongside the River Clyde and then along the coast of the Clyde Estuary to Troon where the luxurious Piersland House Hotel (www.piersland.co.uk) awaited our arrival. Dinner was taken in the Conservatory Restaurant, the starter of Warm Ayrshire Bacon and Mixed Cheese Salad with a French Dressing proving appetising and satisfying, accompanied by a 2012 Chilean Valdemoro Sauvignon Blanc. The main course was Char Grilled Pork Loin Steak served with Stornoway Black Pudding and red wine jus – extremely mouth watering and quite filling, the accompanying 2009 Beronia Rioja Crianza rich and full bodied, complimenting the dish admirably. Dessert was a Fruits of the Forest Cheesecake, attractively presented and rather “moreish”.

Wednesday dawned sunny and bright and the snow capped peaks of the Isle of Arran glistened across the Firth of Clyde as we travelled down the coast, through Ayr, to Culzean Castle, now owned by the National Trust for Scotland, but previously the seat of the Kennedy family since the 14th century. The present Castle (www.culzeanexperience.org) was re-designed by the great Scottish architect Robert Adam in the late 18th century and its grandeur is both opulent and memorable. The Armoury itself contains the largest collections of its type in existence, apart from that of Her Majesty the Queen in Windsor Castle. The 12th Earl bought this collection from the Tower of London and they were dispatched in twelve chests *“along with one of the men from the Tower who will fix them up in a proper manner”*. Continuing through the Castle, the Oval Staircase with its rich red carpeting and surrounded by Doric, Corinthian and Ionic columns in white is an Adam masterpiece – a dramatic focal point in the Castle. The top floor of the Castle is referred to as the Eisenhower Apartment, originally designed and built by Robert Adam for the 10th Earl as a fabulous “bachelor pad” where he could entertain his friends. When the Castle was donated by the Kennedy family to the National Trust in 1945, the family gifted the six room apartment to General (later President) Eisenhower as a “thank you” to the wartime hero from the Scottish nation. He used it on several occasions. The Apartment is now available to discerning guests for short holiday breaks and is closed to the public. Unknown to the group, we had organised for everyone to visit the Apartment, where, after a drinks reception,



we were free to explore this exclusive dwelling. Undoubtedly, the “cream on the cake” of a wonderful visit to this marvellous castle. The poor weather had held back growth in what are magnificent gardens but nevertheless, they were attractive and relaxing for a leisurely stroll.

With lunch beckoning, we headed north to Alloway, on the outskirts of Ayr where we were greeted by Baron Angus Meldrum and his charming wife Anne-Marie at the well known Brig o’Doon House Hotel (www.brigodoonhouse.com), adjacent to the infamous brig (bridge) over the River Doon where in Robert Burns poem “Tam o’Shanter”, the inebriated Tam gets chased by witches who, although unable to cross water, managed to pull off the tail of Tam’s horse Meg! Once settled into the wood beamed dining room looking out over stunning gardens and the River Doon, we enjoyed the Brig o’Doon Shepherds Pie, made with succulent slow cooked lamb and accompanied by a Chilean 2011 Pinot Noir “Los Gonsos Cono Sur”. For dessert, we sampled a traditional Scottish dish, Cloutie Dumpling with custard (www.scottishrecipes.co.uk/cloutiedumpling.htm), rich, flavoursome and satisfying!

Lunch over, we meandered down to the famous brig where our guide Catherine displayed her artistic talent by reciting the opening verse of Burns poem, Tam o’Shanter with vigour and panache! We then paid a visit to the new and nearby Robert Burns Museum (www.burnsmuseum.org.uk) which

gives an insight into the life and works of the Scottish Bard, who wrote so many songs and poems that it is difficult to believe that he was only 37 years old when he died. Perhaps not for the really serious Burns aficionados, but for the average Burns enthusiast, a treasure trove of his writings and artefacts. Departing Alloway, we passed by the tiny thatched cottage where Burns was born on 25th January 1759 and then we were on our way through the rolling East Ayrshire hills and into the Borders to Cardrona near Peebles. The Macdonald Cardrona Hotel (www.macdonaldhotels.co.uk/our-hotels/macdonald-cardrona) is a relatively new hotel set in rolling hills beside its own stunning golf course and the group quickly settled into their rooms before assembling in the Manderston Suite for dinner. Our starter was a Ham Hock with Parsley Terrine with Piccallili, coupled with a 2012 Chateau du Campuget Invitation Blanc from Costieres de Nimes in the southern Rhone. The main course of Roast Breast of Free Range Chicken with a spicy Haggis filling was well received, as was the 2011 Foundstone Merlot from Berton Vineyards in South Eastern Australia. The dessert was a Cranachan Cheesecake which was slightly lacking in character, although acceptable on the palate. The evening, rather surprisingly, finished up in the bar where Nicol and Ormond led a rousing rendition of “A Rouchy Cha Cha”, with all present getting “into the act”!!

Thursday would be the final day of the 2013 Scottish Tour and our first stop would be the beautiful ruins of Melrose Abbey where the heart of Robert the Bruce is buried. Founded in 1136 by Cistercian monks and completed in 1146 (although added to over the next 50 years), the abbey had a



chequered life, being badly damaged by the English armies in 1544, the monks finally vacating the abbey some ten years later. Considered to be one of the most beautiful monastic ruins in Britain, the abbey is certainly impressive and the views from the top of the spiral staircase in the tower are spectacular.....once you get your breath back and your head stops spinning! In warm sunshine, it was onward to Floors Castle (www.roxburghe.net/floorscastle.html) the home of the Duke of Roxburghe. Set in expansive grounds bordering

the River Tweed, the drive through the impressive archway sets the scene for an awe inspiring visit. The castle is enormous and the public rooms are filled with furnishings, drapes, tapestries and artefacts which are literally priceless. Words cannot adequately describe the opulence of this castle, such is the grandeur. Regrettably, photographs are forbidden within the rooms so memories are all that remain of our visit.

Our venue for lunch was the Cross Keys Hotel in the heart of the old market square of Kelso, where, after some discussion, it was decided to omit the visit to Traquair House (www.traquair.co.uk) and head up to Edinburgh for some “retail therapy”!! Our coach driver John dropped the group off in the Royal Mile, returning some two hours later, during which a fair amount of “therapy” was achieved! Onward to the Dakota Hotel (www.dakotahotels.co.uk) at South Queensferry for our final night where we bade farewell to Catherine, our guide, who’s relaxed, informative style in perfect French had endeared her to the group. We also met up with four members who travelled down from Inverness for the closing dinner – Bev Manson, Christina Cameron, Jean Slater and our Bailli Dick Beach. John dropped off the party at the Orocco Pier Hotel (www.oroccopier.co.uk), parked up the coach at the Dakota and joined the Confreres for the dinner.

We were welcomed to the Fuchsia Suite, looking out to the iconic Forth Rail Bridge, by the skirl of the pipes played by the moustachioed Jim Nicholl, resplendent in full Highland Dress and wearing a bearskin – a striking figure indeed!

The Orocco Pier once again surpassed themselves with the menu, plates of canapés (warm “Burgundian” style cheese bites) and a glass of Sant’Orsola Prosecco, were passed round while the pipes played and photographs were taken, followed by the main course, Braised Daube of Scottish Beef with red wine jus, beautifully presented, succulent and satisfying.



To accompany this was a 2011 Malbrontes Malbec-Torontes from Argentina, mouth filling, velvety smooth, fruity and lingering on the palate. The cabaret followed with Scottish Country Dancing and a kilt making exhibition – in 5 minutes!! The dance group made up an old style kilt complete with plaid and dressed one of the male dancers within the allotted time – most impressive and certainly imaginative! Back to dinner and the cheese course followed, a salver of Dunsyre Blue, Orkney Cheddar and a Caboc with crusty bread and oatcakes and to accompany this was a 2007 Sandeman LBV Port, the bottles being placed on the tables and passed around continuously in the traditional clockwise manner! After another dancing display, dessert arrived in the shape of a Banoffee crème brulee and to enjoy with it, a Sant’Orsola Brachetto from Piemonte in Italy, a gently sparkling, light and medium sweet red, unusual perhaps but it certainly “mated” with the brulee.

All too soon the “bell tolled” for our return to the hotel and one last glass of Prosecco between friends. The next morning saw a relaxed start for the Rouen party as they departed for the airport with a rousing rendition of “We’re nae awa tae bide awa” as the coach pulled away from the hotel. Our German confreres, Urban and Irmhild had already headed off into Edinburgh for a day’s sightseeing and Dan and Doris were arranging to collect their hire car for a four day visit to the Lake District before their return to Indianapolis. A fun week, packed with nostalgia (the steam train!), culture (all the different castles) and good food and wine.....and in keeping with the Confrerie motto, excellent company! From Scotland, it was “au revoir et a bientot”.

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