

“WHISKY & CASTLES SCOTTISH TOUR 2016”

by Ormond Smith

With a sizeable overseas attendance for the 11th International Chapitre & Gala Dinner, Connetable Nicol Manson and Narrateur Ormond Smith put together a series of one day visits for the guests, offering them the opportunity of a “long weekend” or a week long stay in the Highland Capital and the surrounding Highland countryside, culminating each evening with quality dinners. Our guests arrived (by different means) on Friday 13th (somewhat appropriate for our American friends whose luggage went AWOL at Heathrow!!! – it arrived safely the next day!) and in the evening the Welcome Dinner took place at the Waterside Hotel, an evening of dining, entertainment and the making and renewing of friendships. The opening course of Kiln Roasted Smoked Salmon with Asparagus was followed by the main course of Haggis, Neeps and Tatties which had been immediately preceded by James Sheerin doing his excellent “Address to a Haggis”, complete with slashing dirk and dramatic presentation! The meal rounded off with Cranachan & Shortbread and these dishes were enjoyed with a 2015 Cullinan View Sauvignon Blanc from South Africa and a 2015 Berri Estates Shiraz from SE Australia.

With a recital on the fiddle by 11 year old Finlay Maclennan, a display of Scottish Country Dancing by the Claire Bryce Highland Dancers accompanied by Stephen Spencer on the bagpipes, the evening continued with a selection of Scottish dances with the Plaid Ceilidh Band and the floor was soon heaving as Sue Mackay, our Chambellan, cajoled, encouraged or just plain grabbed folk up to dance and led with rousing instructions as the dances continued.....well done Sue!

On Saturday morning, the visitors along with Ormond and our STA Guide, Susan Brown, headed off for Loch Ness to visit the Exhibition Centre in Drumnadrochit, followed by Urquhart Castle, before being entertained for a whisky fuelled lunch at Fiddlers (www.fiddledrum.co.uk), courtesy of our Bailli Dick Beach. With a Glen Ord, a Tomatin and a Talisker in front of each of us, the scene was set for some



A whisky fuelled lunch at Fiddlers....with 3 different drams!



The Confrerie group at the Culloden Battlefield Cairn

enjoyable degustations.and a tasty

lunch!! A relaxing return trip to town allowed for some afternoon shopping/rest and then preparations for the International Chapitre and Gala Dinner in the evening (*see separate report*).

Bright eyed (!?!) and bushy tailed, we set off on Sunday for an educational sojourn around Culloden Battlefield, with guide Susan an absolute mine of information, and although the breeze was brisk and

bracing, it wasn't too cold. Cawdor Castle (www.cawdorcastle.com) then beckoned for a tour and visit to the gardens before we lunched at Cawdor Tavern (www.cawdortavern.co.uk), a traditional roast beef lunch with a warming glass of Shiraz "hitting the spot". It was then off to Fort George for a visit to Europe's largest fort, the visitors doing their own thing among the numerous attractions before returning to town and a Sunday evening buffet at the Cinnamon Indian Restaurant, by now becoming a bit of a tradition!

The final full day for the "long weekend" guests saw the coach heading off early to avoid the worst of Inverness rush hour traffic and head east to Elgin for a visit to the famous Johnstons Cashmere Mill (www.johnstonscashmere.com) – the tour of the mill was quite enthralling and quite a number

found the retail shop too much of an attraction.....probably much to the delight of Johnstons! Thereafter, we took the road to Speyside, through Rothes and Aberlour to the famed Glenfarclas Distillery (www.glenfarclas.co.uk/en) at Marypark for both a tour and tasting, to be followed by a lunch in the gloriously appointed "Ships Room", the panelling coming from the RMS Empress of Australia (formerly the German ocean liner Tirpitz when built in Poland in 1919 for the Hamburg-America Line) and the ceiling lovingly re-created to the original design, complete with chandeliers. Regrettably the Chairman John Grant had to excuse



The Inviting wood panelled Visitor Centre at Glenfarclas

himself from a personal welcome as he was suffering from a rather nasty dose of 'flu and had no wish to inflict "the dreaded lurgie" on his guests. The tour was ably conducted by both Miriam and Donna before we sampled both a single malt 15yo and a 17yo prior to lunch. The lunch itself was a truly sumptuous buffet with accompanying wines and followed by a dram of the Chairman's Reserve, a vatting of four casks from the 1960's, selected by the Chairman, Mr John Grant, to commemorate the 175th anniversary of the Distillery..... a truly stupendous dram with initial sherry overtones, giving way to blackcurrants, toffee, honey and butterscotch and on the palate dark chocolate ending with a gloriously long finish of caramel toffee. What a way to complete a tasting.....many thanks, John, very much appreciated! With the lunch having "lingered" somewhat, it was felt prudent to cancel our planned visit to the Speyside Cooperage and head back to Inverness, particularly as the majority of our French friends and the German party required time to pack before dinner and their prompt departure for home the next morning. The "Farewell to European Friends Dinner" was held in the Waterside Hotel, starting off with a Highland Game Terrine with Pistachio, accompanied by a 2013 Vermentino Bocelli from Tuscany, followed by Pan Fried Hake Fillet with Braised Lentils and with it a 2014 Errazuriz 1870 Teno Block Merlot. The dinner culminated with a Tangy Lemon Torte with Raspberries. (See footnote No.1 for the full Waterside Menu)

Tuesday morning dawned a bit grey and with our trip to the West Coast for our American friends and three of the French party, an anxious eye was on the weather forecast.....to be expected – rain! Off we went down Loch Ness and then headed west to visit Eilean Donan Castle, the guiding duties now being handled by both Ormond and Françoise Chalbet from Donzère in the Rhone Valley. The castle tour (www.eileandonancastle.com), as always, was full of interest and as the rain began to make its presence, we headed over the Mam Ratagan pass, stopping at the "damp" viewpoint for

the dramatic views out over Loch Duich and the famed Five Sisters Mountain range of Kintail. Onwards to Glenelg and into the atmospheric Glenelg Inn (www.glenelg-inn.com) for a seafood lunch, freshly caught that day! The hake was very tasty and the hand dived scallops were just wonderful! Then in the “soft” rain it was down to the Glenelg ferry (the last turntable ferry in use in Scotland) and across the Strait to Skye.....the misty isle and with the rain, the Cuillin Mountains



The reflective Water Garden at the start of the Attadale Gardens Tour

were regrettably lost in the distance. Having gone over to Skye on the ferry it was now time to “go over the sea”, not to Skye but back to the mainland by means of the spectacular Skye Bridge, swooping high over Loch Alsh. Through Kyle of Lochalsh and then over the pass to Strathcarron and a visit to the beautiful, awe-inspiring, Attadale Gardens (www.attadalegardens.com). A visit here is most highly recommended! The gardens were

devastated by a major storm in the 1980’s and have been lovingly designed, rebuilt, replanted and supervised by Nicky Macpherson, herself a noted artist and painter. A warm welcome from the lady laird, Joanna Macpherson preceded a tour of the extensive gardens and its many features and sculptures, prior to being invited to join the family in the “big house” for tea and homemade biscuits, a rare privilege. After a short talk on the estate by Ewen Macpherson and a few words by Nicky Macpherson (Joanna’s parents) on the art (both in the house and gardens) and the many paintings, we bade a very friendly farewell as we set course for “Inversneckie”..... and still it rained!

Dinner that evening would be in the city’s renowned Rocpool Restaurant on the banks of the River Ness (www.rocpoolrestaurant.com) where owner Steven Devlin looked after our party admirably. Rocpool enjoys a high reputation and we were not to be disappointed. With a glass of champagne to hand (Delamotte NV), the menu choices were tantalising.....for starters, options on New Season Scottish Asparagus or Hand Dived West Coast Scallops or Buttercrisp Fried Potato Gnocci then scrutiny of the mains – Fillet of John Dory, Roast Halibut with Arbroath Smokie Kedgeree or Slow Cooked Scotch Beef Cheeks in Red Wine. The wine choices for the mains were a 2014 South African Chardonnay from Iona near Elgin and a 2014 Planetta Syrah from Maraccoli in Sicily. The repast



Glenmorangie Distillery with the tallest whisky stills in Scotland

finished with a Cheese Platter. An imaginative menu which undoubtedly lived up to its promise. (See footnote No. 2 for the full Rocpool Menu)

Wednesday morning dawned bright as we headed north across the Kessock Bridge and over the inaptly named Black Isle (actually a peninsula), the normally impressive views of Ben Wyvis obscured by very low cloud. Past the Cromarty Firth with its many oil rigs (either mothballed due to the downturn in oil exploration or in for servicing and repair) and onto Tain and the Glenmorangie Distillery (www.glenmorangie.com), arguably the UK’s favourite single malt whisky with between 6 and 6.5 million bottles sold annually, a 6% share of the UK market! With Rachel, our guide, we were to do the distillery tour

and then have a sampling of their "Signet" whisky. This was done in the rather luxurious tasting room and with audio headphones on, we listened to and tasted the Signet in the correct way.....a very enjoyable experience (and the audio presentation was equally memorable, indeed even seductive!!). The Signet is a fusion of Glenmorangie's oldest whiskies, distilled over thirty years ago and matured in a selection of the world's finest casks – pronounced espresso on the nose, fused with plum pudding and orange peel, the palate displays a contrast of rich sweetness and a crackle of sizzling spices and bitter mocha, finishing with a citrusy lemon quality.....superb! Duly "fortified" it was then on for a bite of lunch to the famed Trawler Fish & Chip Restaurant in Golspie (www.trawlerfishandchips.co.uk) and this award winning



Haddock & Chips at the "Trawler"looks good and tasted even better!!

"Chipper" did not disappoint. Fresh Haddock & Chips and a bottle of Black Isle beer.....simple but tasty and satisfying and full marks to those who dined in the traditional way.....with their fingers!!!! We then travelled up to Dunrobin Castle where we enjoyed the falconry display down in the gardens before taking in the Castle Tour.....no small wonder this castle is as popular as it is. A relaxed return trip to town preceded our dinner that evening at the intriguing Culloden House Hotel.

Culloden House (www.cullodenhouse.co.uk), in its present form dates from about 1778, but in fact there have been houses here (in different forms) since the mid 13th century. Owned for many years by the influential Forbes family (1625 – 1897), the house was commandeered as battle headquarters by Charles Edward Stuart (Bonnie Prince Charlie) prior to the Battle of Culloden (1746). Immediately after the battle, apparently Duncan Forbes (a Hanovarian sympathiser....not a Jacobite!) entertained the victorious Duke of Cumberland to dinner.....one does wonder how the conversation went..... " Well, good Sir, and how did your day go....." As you emerge from the tree lined drive, the imposing ivy clad facade of Culloden House fills your vision, the sweeping stone



The imposing Culloden House Hotel

stairway leads you into the imposing entrance hall and thereafter, you are mesmerised by the opulent decor.....this is a "must do" visit you should make! Manager Steven Davies was unexpectedly called away and couldn't welcome us personally, however his assistant Murray did a splendid job of looking after the party from the welcoming glass of champagne to our departing coffees. Dinner was enjoyed in the Adams Dining Room, resplendent with its elaborate plasterwork and furnishings and the tempting menu made for difficult decisions of choice. The standard of cuisine was befitting of the opulent surroundings, with a choice of three starters, North Uist Scallops, A Roast Cauliflower Soup or Pork Cheek and the mains did nothing to ease the decision making.....Fillet of Highland Beef, Label Rouge Salmon or Fennel & Lemon Risotto. Then to further tantalise our taste buds, desserts were either White Chocolate, Poached Rhubarb or Cheese & Oatcakes – all options were beautifully presented, each dish's flavours harmonised well and a party of very satisfied Confreres "waddled" from the dining table to await our carriages (See Footnote No. 3 for the full Culloden House Hotel Menu)

Back at the Waterside, we bade farewell to Ed Koolish and Karen Warner before leaving, as they were jetting back to the US in the morning

The final day of the extended three day tour saw us heading for Speyside and a visit to Cairngorm Mountain (www.cairngormmountain.org)it may have been springtime but the winds were “Baltic”! Onto the Funicular Railway and the views were quite spell binding....until the mist closed in, but we did see the reindeer herd happily grazing high on the Corrie na Ciste ridge. The presentations in the Ptarmigan top station were impressive but sadly the thick mist precluded any of the normally spectacular views from this station. Lunch was enjoyed in Aviemore at the Winking Owl Restaurant (www.thewinkingowl.co) and their Beef and Mushroom Pie marinated in their Black Gold beer and accompanied by hand cut chips was satisfying and delicious. Our final visit was to the Highland Folk Museum in Newtonmore, (www.highlifehighland.com/highlandfolkmuseum) an open air museum illustrating life in the Highlands from the 1700’s up until the 1960’s, with different buildings offering insights into how life was in those times – indeed you could be almost misled into thinking that some of the houses were still occupied, such is the reality. Well worth a visit! Back to Inverness and time to prepare for the second closing dinner of the tour, this time courtesy of James and Heather Sheerin at their home.



Cairngorm Mountain - looking downhill from the Funicular Railway

The Scots had enjoyed a home visit when in Indianapolis last September with Ed Koolish and Karen Warner and James felt it prudent that the Scots reciprocate.....it was just a great pity that Ed and Karen were unable to be with us. The evening got off to a splendid start when Patrick and Sophie Laverny (two of our French confreres) arrived clutching three bottles of Piper Heidsieck Champagne for an aperitif.....well, one felt obliged to assist in the disposition of said wine – a glass (or two!) were taken and enjoyed.....many thanks, Patrick and Sophie! The meal Heather and James had prepared was truly sumptuous, starting with a Mixed Seafood Platter served with a 2015 Albarino Rias Baixas. This was followed by a delicious marinated Venison Casserole accompanied by a superb Amarone 2003 from Contessa Guerrieri-Rizzardi. We then enjoyed some Scottish Cheeses with Beaune Clos du Chateau 2011, opened for the banquet previously and preserved with vacu-vin "corks", - drinking even better than the previous Saturday! This stupendous evening climaxed with a Port comparison, a Warre 2000 and a Graham 2000 Vintage Ports from Heather and James' cellar. Wow, what an evening!!

Our international friends left the following morning and, like their counterparts a few days earlier, with a host of memories of visits which were enthralling, lunches and dinners which were really well presented and enjoyed/savoured and an overall time in the Scottish Highlands in dramatic scenery with likeminded members of the Goustevin “family”. Yet another successful tour executed – “high fives” all round!!

Footnote One – Waterside Hotel “Farewell to European Friends Dinner”

Starter:- Highland Game Terrine with Pistachio, Cherry Gel, Crisp Crackers and Mixed Leaves

Wine:- 2013 Vermentino, Bocelli from Tuscany – Fresh, light straw yellow with floral melon & citrus flavours with a refreshing dry finish

Main Course:- Pan Fried Hake Fillet with Braised Lentils, Dressing of Asparagus, Crispy Potato Dice, Cherry Tomatoes, Mini Capers and Highland Rapeseed Oil

Wine:- 2104 Errazuriz 1870 Teno Block Merlot, Curico Valley, Chile – pronounced fruit on the nose with juicy plum flavours and hints of oak and smooth tannins on the satisfying finish

Dessert:- Tangy Lemon Torte with Raspberries, Wee Meringues and Berry Coulis

Footnote Two – Rocpool Restaurant (Tuesday evening)

Champagne:- Delamotte NV. From the House of Delamotte established 1760, this wine is primarily Chardonnay with a lovely balance of fresh, well rounded rich fruit and floral notes

Choice of Starter:- New season Scottish Asparagus with Crisp Golden Pollenta, Soft Poached Egg & Watercress with Shaved Parmesan and Capers **OR**

Hand Dived West Coast Scallops with Baby Chorizo, Spring onion Creme Fraiche & Lemon and Garlic Parsley **OR** Butter

Crisp Fried Potato Gnocci with Slow Cooked Tuscan Duck Ragu, Wild Mushrooms and Pancetta with Shaved Parmesan & Parsley

Wine:- 2014 Chardonnay, Iona Vineyards, Elgin, South Africa. Concentrated marzipan and citrus notes with underlying lemon and on the palate, taut acidity brushed with buttery oak....just like a fine Burgundy!

Choice of Mains:- Fillet of John Dory with rendezvous of Sardinian Fregola & Fresh Shellfish with Roasted Pepper and Tomato Bisque **OR**

Roast Halibut with Spiced Arbroath Smokie Kedgeree, Soft Poached Egg & Wilted Spinach **OR**
Scotch Beef Cheeks Slow Cooked in Red Wine with Risotto of Wild Mushrooms, Wilted Spinach, Parmesan & Garlic Thyme Butter

Wine:- 2014 Planeta Syrah, Maraccoli, Sicily. Ruby Red with aromas of berry fruits, mint chocolate and peppers and on the palate pronounced fruit and a lingering finish

Scottish Cheese Platter:- Selection of Scottish Cheeses

Footnote Three – Culloden House Hotel (Wednesday evening)

Choice of Starter:- North Uist Hand Dived Scallops, White Grape, Gingerbread, Carrot & Caraway **OR**
Roast Cauliflower Soup with Tumeric, Garlic and Sourdough Crostini **OR**

Braised Pork Ravioli with Parsley, Chervil on a Velvet Crab Bisque

Wine:- Maison Capitain-Gagnerot Ladoix Premier Cru Les Grechons et Foutrieres 2011.

100% Burgundian Chardonnay displaying brilliant gold in the glass, aromas of acacias and silky and rich on the palate.

Choice of Mains:- Fillet of Highland Beef with Spring Cabbage, Local Beetroot, Saffron Potato and Ox Tongue Marrow **OR**

Fillet of Salmon with Champagne Leeks, Peas, West Coast Langoustine, Horseradish & Dill Foam **OR**
Fennel & lemon Risotto with Soft Fried Hens Egg, Brown Caper Butter and Fennel Crisps

Wine:- *Chateau Beaumont, Haut Medoc 2004* Strong fruity notes on the nose and hints of old tobacco and smokiness on the palate with seductively rounded tannins

Choice of Dessert:- *White Chocolate & Duck Egg Slice, Blood Orange Sorbet and Marscarpone* **OR**
Poached Rhubarb with Vanilla Ice Cream, Rock Rose gin Granita, Rhubarb Sorbet **OR**
Cheese & Oatcakes (Blue Murder from Tain / Clava Brie from Connage / Applewood Smoked from Kintyre)

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