

# A Ticket To Ride

## Travel Diary

### Chapter 1

We were lost! Dusk was approaching and on each side of the road that we had followed for the last hour, snowdrifts were forming. We had set out earlier in the day from Fort William on the west coast of Scotland heading for Loch Ness, intending to overnight at a small village along the way. Somehow we misread the map at a crucial turn off or perhaps the iPad Google maps were not up to date – a trap for the inexperienced traveller.

We observed the very high fences running the length of the road, noting the huge antlers of red deer behind the wire...the penny was starting to drop – we were on a hunting estate!....a little anxious by then that we might be shot at, we headed for lights in the distance and arrived at an impressive gatehouse.

Our driver spoke with the Ghillie – a formidable tartan wearing, red headed, ex-military squaddie by the look, who informed us that we were trespassing on the 18,000 acre Kingie Estate - Scotland's largest, privately owned hunting property. He offered the information that if we enjoyed fishing and stalking, a week at The Lodge which sleeps fourteen would cost us \$2,100 otherwise we should reverse and head back down the road before we were snowed in.

When at last we arrived at the Drynachan B&B – a 17<sup>th</sup> century guesthouse on the banks of Loch Oich – we were met by our host, holding aloft a lamp to light the way. Our room was a revelation – warm and embracing with fluffy white towels, fresh soap in “Spode” dishes, daffodils on the casement window, and comfy beds with deep, soft quilts. We felt cosseted and cared for – an experience oft repeated in the following weeks of our Scottish trip.

After dinner at the nearby Drynachan Hotel we were welcomed back to our lodgings for a nightcap. Ushered into the family room, a large fire crackled, and an old dog stretched out on a colourful Persian rug. We settled into a deep leather lounge and hosts, Neville and Sonia Roberts poured whiskies, regaling us with tales of Bonnie Prince Charlie who they say, stayed overnight on his escape from the Battle of Culloden in 1746. Culloden, about forty miles distant, is not far from Cowder – a place of fame where Macbeth was born.

Sonia and Neville had owned the guesthouse for eight years they said, having come from London for “a sea change”. They had immersed themselves in the local community and Sonia proudly told us of her invitation from “The great Chieftain of the Pudding” on Robbie Burn’s night, to recite the famous “Address to a Haggis”. Each year on the anniversary of the poet’s death, Robbie Burn’s night is celebrated all over Scotland.

Piqued by stories the previous evening, we all said “yes” when offered Haggis for breakfast. Neville, cleverly omitted the cooking details when serving up this culinary feast. He had prepared it using a mixture of sheep’s heart, lung and liver; minced onion, suet, spices and salt encased in the animal’s stomach. We had slices with bacon and eggs and it was lovely!

Armed with maps and advice we headed off to the Education Centre at Loch Ness. The Loch contains more water than all the lakes in Britain and Wales combined and at its deepest is 271 metres according to the experts. All sorts of theories abound in relation to the Loch Ness monster. Despite exhaustive sonar testing, long term observation, deep water searching and photographs nothing is proved they say.

Still, a chill goes up my spine when a police boat pulls in asking visitors to keep an eye out for a body in the water. They have been combing the banks of the Loch since dawn when a lone fisherman reportedly witnessed a man dragged out of his boat while retrieving his nets.

He was unable to describe the attacker other than stating that there was an enormous splash and then nothing.

Thrill seekers we were and driven by curiosity, we went to the ticket booth at Loch Ness, to purchase tickets to ride on the jet boat that skimmed the surface of the dark and turbulent waters of Loch Ness.

*(Mary Wyatt)*

## Chapter 2

Tickets for the jet boat ride were obviously in hot demand; it seemed that we were not the only sightseers curious about what had happened earlier in the day. Could the man have been pulled overboard by the fabled Loch Ness Monster; most unlikely we thought, but still experienced a frisson of fear and excitement.

In a way I wish the kids were with us, my husband said, they would be beside themselves at a possible sighting of the Monster. Derek had been keen to bring them with us on our driving holiday, but I had persuaded him that we deserved time alone, and to indulge ourselves. Once everyone was on board the Captain turned his boat into the choppy waters and we were away. Both the sky and water looked threatening, the sky because it looked like a major downpour was imminent and the water because it stretched down endlessly, getting deeper, darker and more mysterious. We sped across the loch with the captain appearing somewhat distracted. A police boat was cruising along the far shore line, clearly still searching for the missing man.

We were going at a hell of a pace; freezing water was splashing up and over us. A combination of the jet boat's speed, a missing man and a possible sighting of the Loch Ness monster had everyone's adrenaline running high. One of the passengers suddenly yelled out, "Oh my God, it's Nessie, look, look over there". All eyes turned in the direction she was pointing, but the boat sped by too fast to see anything. The obliging captain dropped speed and re-traced our path; a long black shape swam towards the boat amidst screams of excitement. The Captain quickly burst our bubble by explaining that it was just an eel, common enough in the Loch and only about 2 metres long anyway. He sped up again, took us through a few dizzying circles and headed back to the launch site.

It was somewhat of an anti-climax getting into the car and heading back to our bed and breakfast; still we had a good tale to tell. Derek drove cautiously along the narrow, tree lined roads, it was late evening, getting dark and the roads were a bit icy. The car did not seem to be warming up at all despite consulting the driver manual and twiddling every possible knob. We were both beginning to feel increasingly cold and keen to be back at our accommodation, in front of a roaring log fire. Darkness suddenly swamped us and I had to strain to recognise familiar landmarks. For some reason I began to feel nervous, worried we would not find our way back. You missed the turning I yelled at Derek, you should have turned back there, what are you doing? "What am I doing, what do you think I am doing? I am driving us safely home, now stop yelling and calm down." It was still freezing and I was feeling rattled and uneasy, I didn't quite believe Derek hadn't missed the turn off but thought I had better shut up.

Finally I saw a sign for Loch Oich which meant we were very close to our B&B. Thank God I thought and my annoyance at Derek evaporated, I felt a surge of affection for him, so much so that I began to imagine a glorious night of wine and sex. You wonderful man, you got us back, I love you I said wrapping my arms around his neck. Amazing how one's libido increased without children around. Bloody hell Margo, all I did was drive us home on a straight road, but if that's the result I will do it more often, let's get inside. Neville and Sonia, our hosts greeted us warmly and we all filed inside to the welcome warmth of the log fire. To our delight they offered to provide dinner so that we didn't have to venture out again. Wonderful! Things were getting better and better. There were no other guests, so the four of us settled down comfortably by the fire. Our pleasure was enhanced by a good Scotch whiskey and excellent companionship. Still in a somewhat excited mood, we related the day's events to Neville and Sonia. Both reacted strongly, worrying whether the man could be someone they knew, however they didn't buy the tale of the Loch Ness Monster. "Oh no, we don't believe Nessie exists, it's a load of rubbish invented to draw the tourists in" Neville announced quite emphatically.

After a delicious dinner of fresh salmon, we bade our hosts good night and climbed the stairs to our bedroom. Derek slid his arm around me lovingly, clearly he was remembering my outburst of affection earlier on and hoping it meant his luck was in. The bed beckoned.

*(Pat Matthews)*

## Chapter 3

I took no time discarding my clothes and sliding in to bed. Derek was almost as quick. I stretched on to my favourite right hand side, with my left leg drawn up slightly. Derek snuggled in behind me, his right hand warm on my back between my shoulder blades, and his left hand thrown over my body. The details of what happened next are vague, apart from a glorious sensation of being excessively loved and at peace with the world.

I was warm, I was relaxed and I was loved.

Time became lost.

Daylight came early, so we'd showered in the cubicle in the corner of our bedroom, and were ready to go when Neville gently sounded his ancient dinner gong, letting us know that breakfast was on the table. This was of course a Scottish breakfast, as the locals frown if you mention a Full English Breakfast in this part of the world. So: porridge, followed by an egg with bacon, and tomato, and a potato scone, and a sausage, and mushrooms, and baked beans, and a chocolate slice, which was referred to as a black pudding for effect. Toast and tea followed.

Having taken our time to consume all this, we took to the road again, having tidied our room, packed our cases, cleaned our teeth and paid the bill. Sonia came out from her kitchen to bid us farewell, while Neville graciously handled the EFTPOS arrangements.

We were due in Edinburgh that night as we'd booked accommodation near the Castle, so were keen to make tracks. We didn't take the shortest route as suggested by Google Maps, as we wanted to go north again, back through the Nessie tourist town of Drumnadrochit, to Inverness and then south through the Cairngorms via Perth to Edinburgh.

We took our time going back up the western side of Loch Ness towards Inverness, pointing out the places where we'd taken a wrong turn, or thought we should have turned, but didn't, eventually catching glimpses of the Loch at intervals through the trees.

Although Inverness no doubt has its attractions, including an impressive castle, the city wasn't on our itinerary for this trip: perhaps next time. I was not even moved to travel an additional ten kilometres off our intended route to see Culloden Moor where in 1746, 1,500 or more of Bonnie Prince Charlie's Scots died in less than an hour, trying to regain England for the Stuart family from King George I of the House of Hanover.

We continued on down through the middle highlands to the Cairngorms National Park, passing through towns with picturesque names such as Boat of Garten, Aviemore, Kingussie, (pronounced King-ew-see), Ruthen, (pronounced Riven), and Dalwhinnie, to the Garry River and the large white Scottish baronial pile of Blair Atholl castle.

The information sheet proudly told us that the Duke of Atholl, who legally no longer owns his own castle, is the only person in the United Kingdom who is entitled to raise his own army, the Atholl Highlanders. These days however, it has been downgraded to a ceremonial infantry regiment, and is not part of the British Army. This ability to raise his own army was bestowed on the Duke by Queen Victoria, in appreciation of the security which was undertaken by his staff during her stay at the Castle in 1844. She'd enjoyed this stay so much that Prince Albert built her her own castle at Balmoral, also in the Cairngorms, but to the north of Blair Atholl.

A piper in full regimental dress in epauletted and cuffed jacket, white belting, full plaid and matching kilt with a large horse-hair sporran, white spats and hose, was playing 'Road to the Isles' when we arrived.

My mind went back to my father's light baritone singing: *'Sure by Tummel and Loch Rannock and Loch Arbor I will go, by heather tracks with heaven in their smile. If you're thinking in your inner heart there's braggin' in my step, you've never smelt the tangle of the Isles.'*

Sure the song was about a cross country trip to the Isle of Skye, and the Cuillin Mountains, but Loch Tummel was only a couple of miles south of there, so it was pretty appropriate after all. The emotion was definitely very real, and I was overcome with tears at the spectacle of sight and sound.

Because it was very chilly that day, we hopped back into the car and followed the secondary road down to the town of Bridge of Tilt and it's Atholl Arms Hotel, where a log fire in the public bar was a welcome sight. We chose a table and asked for the haggis soup with a tattie scone, and a shot of Glenfiddich each. A couple of older locals arrived shortly after, along with their Scottish terriers, which headed straight for their usual table to immediately lie down underneath without any instruction to do so.

It took us a little getting used to, this habit of Scots, and English for that matter, to take it as a matter of course that dogs are welcomed in public bars. It's quite endearing really, as the dogs are all remarkably well behaved.

We stopped for a quick look at the site of the Battle of Killiecrankie, (1689): again the Scots versus the English. This battle being mostly famous for that section of the

river called *'The Soldier's Leap'*, where a fleeing soldier escaped his pursuers by leaping across a narrow ravine. If it's true, it's an amazing feat.

We continued on through Pitlochry towards Perth, where road-works held us up, and as we weren't familiar with the town names, took a wrong turning and ended up in Dundee, some twenty miles east of our projected route. Having crossed the Tay Road Bridge to the south, we were then in the Kingdom of Fife, well known as the home county of the fictional Edinburgh Detective John Rebus and his creator Ian Rankin.

This was now open farming country with farm houses and their outbuildings dotted along the road instead of wooded narrow valleys which we had just come through. To my eye the large barns seemed unnecessary until I remembered that cattle were kept inside during the winter in this part of the world, and in fact through most of northern Europe.

St. Andrews, famous for both its university, which was attended by Prince William and Princess Catherine, and for being the home of golf, was off to the east, but was outside our time frame.

Then to the famous Firth of Forth bridge. Well, it's the rail bridge that's famous for its three cantilevered arches, while the road bridge is a smaller scale version of the Golden Gate Bridge, and not so spectacular, at least while driving over it.

Peak hour city traffic held us up on our way to Edinburgh's central area, where we checked into our motel.

*(Don Gemmell)*

## Chapter 4

The guidebook had been less than generous in calling the quaint building we arrived at a motel. Red walls were offset by white lintel framed windows. Baskets of bright pot plants picked out colour in the late afternoon sun. What a relief after the traffic. Our hosts, Abigail and Fiona emerged to greet us and show us to a cosy room with a venerable iron-frame bed.

We stowed our bags as best we could in the confined room. Derek said he was famished, and I had to agree. It had been a long day of roaming the countryside and sitting in traffic. The cold weather was giving me a healthy appetite. We went downstairs and found Fiona sitting in the common room. She suggested the Spotted Salmon. It was old, served good food, and most important was only a short walk away.

Outside the cold weather had turned to a light drizzle. The Spotted Salmon sat on the rain-bright corner of a cobbled square. The building was made of stone rather than brick which gave it the look of great age. Inside it was refreshingly free of the urge to modernise that has affected so many fine pubs. The walls were lined with pictures of rugby matches and what we took to be local teams.

We sat at a wooden table that shone with the inner glow that old wood gets when it has been lovingly polished for decades. A robust slab of a man walked up to our table.

“What will it be?”

“What do you recommend?” asked Derek, a bit perturbed by the man’s gruff manner.

“Drunken bullocks.”

“What’s that?”

“Beef.”

“Don't mind old Duncan,” said a cheery voice from behind the bar. “He's from Stromness and about as sunny as the weather out there.” A short, dark-haired woman emerged.

“Hello, I’m Jan.

“You’ll want the Drunken Bullocks. They’re beef medallions in a cream and whisky sauce. Perfect for the cold weather.”



We ordered them and the sauce was everything that Jan had promised, rich and creamy with hints of mustard and smoky whisky.

Duncan appeared to check on the food,

“Would you like a wee drop with that?” he rumbled.

“Don’t worry Duncan,” said Jan. “I’ll bring it right over.”

She came over carrying two cut-glass tumblers with a finger of pale amber liquid in each. We had been in Scotland long enough to know better than to ask for ice or water. I took a cautious sip. The fiery malt flooded my tastebuds with charcoal and peat flavours.

“Duncan, Is this the whiskey in the sauce?”

“Of course. I wouldn’t cook with a whisky I wouldn’t drink.”

After dinner, the rain appeared to be clearing. We walked back to the motel pleasantly drowsy from the whisky and a hearty meal. The coverlet on our bed had been turned down and a small vase with fresh flowers from the garden stood on my bedside table. This motel really was a find.

The next morning, Abigail prepared a hearty Scottish breakfast to fortify us for the day’s adventures. Derek pored over maps and guidebooks while we ate, finding a dozen interesting things to see. We decided to start with the Castle. Abigail told us about a bus we could take that would drop us within a reasonable walk of the castle.

Armed with local knowledge we caught the bus to George IV Bridge with the aim of walking a while before heading to the castle. The bridge is no longer a bridge, but more a raised road on which a number of shops and civic buildings are located.

I was intrigued by the sign outside a coffee shop which said “JK Rowling did not write here.”

“I read about this in the guide,” said Derek. “Follow me.”

He led me to the Elephant House Coffee shop, and we ordered coffee before walking through to the back room which presented an excellent view of the castle. This is the room where JK Rowling wrote Harry Potter. We may have sipped coffee at the very table she used.

Refreshed by the coffee, we walked on to see the statue of Grey Friars Bobby, the famous Skye terrier who is reputed to have spent fourteen years guarding the grave of his master.

We took out time strolling the Royal Mile before arriving at the Mound, the hill on which the castle is perched. Five minutes of energetic climbing saw us arrive at the Castle Esplanade.

The Castle itself is an expansive overview of the history of Scotland. Inside we found an illustrated history laid out on nine panels covering events from King David's National Assembly, to Robert the Bruce through to the siege of Bonnie Prince Charlie.

We started our walking tour at Foog's Gate, the arch through which countless soldiers have stepped. Up on the battlements the wind had an icy bite to it, but the view was breathtaking. We could see across the Firth of Forth on to Fife.

We hurried out of the wind to view the Scottish Crown Jewels, the oldest crown jewels in the United Kingdom. They are an impressive piece of history alongside the Stone of Destiny that has been used to inaugurate monarchs for centuries, not the least of who was Mary, Queen of the Scots.

Staying inside, we took in the Great Hall which has echoed this proud history since it was built in 1511. Built by James IV, it was the venue for Scottish Parliaments until 1639. The carved wooden support columns and original hammerbeam roof are a tribute to the handcrafted time before machines.

Our walking tour of the Castle would not be complete without a mention of the Dogs Cemetery, a quiet space dedicated to the much loved pets of British army officers since the 1840's.

That evening footsore and weary from our adventures, we returned to the Spotted Salmon for dinner. Duncan prepared trout baked in herbs that was so soft it fell off the bones as we ate it. The flavour was subtle and so delicious. It was a genuine surprise that the taciturn man could cook so well. We enjoyed the trout so much we ate in a comfortable silence only broken by the sound of a small TV in the corner of the bar. My ears tuned to the weather report that promised another day of cold, but this time sunny weather.

Back at the motel Derek and I snuggled up in the downy softness of the bed. It was welcoming and I felt my eyes closing. Tomorrow would be our last day. The weather was looking promising and I was looking forward to one more memorable day before we headed home.

*(Carleton Chinner)*

## Chapter 5

Our Scottish trip was coming to an end when we received an unexpected invitation from an old BBC friend to meet her at New Lanark, an hour's drive from Edinburgh. On hearing that she was part of a team filming the Antiques Road Show there, we organized tickets for a train ride in record time having already handed back our rented car in Edinburgh.

The "Rail Planner" app on our iPad had been a godsend for negotiating the complicated UK rail timetable. We were able to get return tickets on the Scotland Line for 20 GBP with a connecting bus to the Visitor Centre at New Lanark. We decided to book overnight Air BNB accommodation nearby and so looked at the many choices on the website. The most interesting room was in an old vicarage, walking distance from the Visitor Centre, and home to a "lively family of six, plus three dogs and two cats". An airy attic room with queen size bed and ensuite was offered at a modest 50 GBP per night including breakfast. The website reviews were favourable and the hosts, Susan and Giles well regarded.

We boarded the 8am train, stowed our backpack overhead and settled down with coffee and the iPad to research our destination. We were impressed with the comfort and cleanliness of the trains we had used especially compared to those in Brisbane where trains are often grubby, noisy and late! A conductor sporting an unusual badge proudly told us that we were now travelling at 220 miles per hour, a new badge having been issued to celebrate the official speed.

New Lanark is a village on the River Clyde, according to Wikipedia, and was a social experiment way back in 1786, founded by David Dale where the employees of the cotton mills were housed; their children schooled and health and spiritual needs of the community met. It is now recognized as a World Heritage site and ideal as a location for filming the Antiques Road Show.

Derek had actually bought with him from Australia, an old coin, dated 1832, stamped with the words "Brazilia" in the hope that we might get a chance to attend a show as we are keen fans. With this in mind we readied ourselves for a quick exit as soon as the train pulled up. There were people everywhere - on foot, travelling by car, bike, horseback - it is the country after all...and we passed them all in our air-conditioned bus.

The 26<sup>th</sup> of July was a hot summery day with a clear blue sky and as we drew near we could see the already formed queue of devotees on the large expanse of green lawn..! they came prepared with picnics, thermoses, comfy chairs and

everywhere, dogs...little dogs in smart tartan; Lurchers on leads; well behaved Collies; busy Beagles – not a cat in sight!

Yet again we were struck by the sangfroid of the Scots – happy to fill in their time with conversation as they waited, and waited...the queue was now serpentine in shape; the volunteers trained by the BBC in crowd control offered hourly water to the older and more infirm...the toilets got a good workout following the water-round and the heat drew crowds to the ice cream vans.

One lucky lady drew gasps from the crowd when she presented a cookbook dated 1692 to the expert. After a comprehensive assessment, he pronounced it to be “a real find” ...but not in tip top shape so only worth 4,000 pounds not the 10,000 it would have fetched if in better order. The owner grinned and said her Mam had got it at a jumble sale and she’d be “aa med up!” (thrilled).

Our coin offering was interesting the appraiser said, but of no value really. Still, this had been a day to remember for us. At dinner that night with our friend from the BBC we reflected on our month long trip around Scotland. We had travelled from one side to the other, savoured the food, and relished the conversations and hospitality of these wonderful folk. Time to return home but in those immortal words – “we’ll be back”.

*(Mary Wyatt)*