

IN THE FOOTPRINTS OF THE PAST

A May 2006 article by Craig Whyte describing a cycle ride journey into the emerald-fringed realm of Kintyre. Reproduced here by kind permission of Scottish Memories magazine.

There was something pleasing about arriving in Kintyre by sea.

I am not sure whether it was the satisfaction of knowing that I had got there through a combination of bicycle and ferry, rather than by the long, looping road from Glasgow, or merely the gut feeling that this was the way it should be.

After all, Kintyre markets itself as ‘the mainland Isle’ and, though this sounds like a contradiction in terms, the area misses out on island status by a mere geographic whisker.

In fact, King Magnus Barelegs of Norway (what a grand name!), who was already master of the Hebrides in the 11th century, considered this peninsula a valid annexe to his island territories and had his longship physically and arduously drawn by its crew across the top neck of Kintyre while he sat at the tiller to prove to King Edgar of Scotland that the land he was ‘sailing’ over was indeed an island. Edgar, however, remained unimpressed and never recognised the claim.

Tarbert, the gateway to Kintyre, was a royal burgh by 1328; and the ruined castle, still standing watches over the town from a high knoll, has close links with Robert the Bruce. The snug, natural harbour has a colourful waterfront with its buildings painting the sheltered waters with reflections of pink, yellow and blue.

This community, used to be dependent on the herring industry, adjacent to Loch Fyne being particularly renowned for its kippers; and, though the fleets have long gone, the seafood connection still remains, the town boasting two of the venues that participate in Argyll’s Seafood Trail.

From there, I cycled across the mile-wide neck of land in minutes (faster than the Vikings!) and for the next few miles had placid Loch Tarbert by my side until it gave way to the open sea and an expanding Atlantic horizon with water lapping on rocky shores, herons and oystercatchers lining up along the beaches and the tang of seaweed, the splash and sizzle of spent waves and the distant, hazy hills of Jura and Islay being my sole companions.

I had entered the so-called ‘Sea Kingdom’, the name now given to coastal Argyll and its islands, a reflection of this realm’s past glories when it was part of Dark Age Dalriada and the Lordship of the Isles whose base was on nearby hazy Islay.

Cycling south, the Isle of Gigha loomed in the foreground, its green pastures sunlit and adorned with rocky, brown hillocks, sparkling gem-like over the blue waves. Its name

derived from the Norse 'Gudey' meaning 'God's Isle' and on such a glorious day I could see why.

Glenbarr Abbey down the coast is really a grand 18th century mansion tucked up a pleasant glen and is the headquarters of the Clan Macalister, an offshoot of the MacDonalds. The laird himself appropriately answered the door in the red and green tartan trews of his clan, with tie, shirt, sweater and jacket each reflecting one of these colours. I skipped the exhibition of dinner service sets in favour of a chat about his clan's history.

This glen was typical of many hereabouts having borne witness to a large and prolonged exodus of inhabitants over the centuries. The earliest emigrants settled in Cape Fear River area of North Carolina in 1739, while later clan members founded a settlement in South Australia, also called Glenbarr in memory of the auld country.

Travelling south again, the wide bulk that is the Mull loomed larger, the emerald Antrim hills over in Ulster getting closer and ever more a part of the Atlantic seascape. It was obvious why the powerful kingdom of Dalriada was established by incomers from across the water rather than from parts of Scotland that now lay far behind.

Suddenly, though the road veered away from the shore, pushed in land by the Links of Machrihanish; and I was in entirely different terrain. This area was remarkably lush and verdant, the traditional ruggedness of the coastline seemingly being a passing illusion.

I pedalled past fields of bemused, munching dairy herds until at last the town of Campbeltown unravelled before me. Its atmosphere has a curious lowland feel, so that farmers, brought here from the Ayrshire plains to replace the vanishing Gaelic natives, must have felt at home.

Herring fleets once sailed from here to the fishing grounds off the Clyde and Atlantic coasts and the industry was a great boon to local communities at a time when the income was sorely needed.

However, not everyone was impressed, One church minister writing about the fishing in Loch Fyne, decried the fervour surrounding the industry, 'Habits of excitement are not favourable to the mind and body, while the almost universal connection between herring fishing and whisky drinking makes it rather a curse than a boon to the people.'

Admittedly, if any link between the two industries and pastimes can be made then it is surely Campbeltown which was once known as the whisky capital of the world. In its Victorian heydays, there were 34 distilleries in and around the town; but the Great Depression plus U.S. Prohibition contributed to a decline; and since 1934 only two have operated. The owners of one recently purchased the old Glen Gyle distillery where the name Kilkerran, the ancient name for Campbeltown, will be given a new lease of life on the labels of the country's newest whisky. When this happens, they will not only be owners of the oldest independent distillery in the land but also of the youngest.

I could have lingered longer, what with shelter from the energy-sapping wind and the temptation of a distillery tour as incentives, but the lure of the coast was greater, though, in the dusk of a greying, tiring day, the village of Southend proved an anticlimax.

As the first brilliant shafts of a new morning's light split the grey of the sky from the dark earth, the outlook seemed brighter and I made my way across the golf course with long-shadowed flags towards the knoll that marks the site of Dunaverty Castle.

This remains a natural defensive location, a high point on a flat coastal plain, partially surrounded by the sea, with sweeping views encompassing swathes of Ulster to the south and the Firth of Clyde to the east, with the great volcanic plug of Ailsa Craig thrust upwards like an intruder from the depths of the dark netherworld.

The castle's site had been strategically occupied for thousands of years and much blood was spilt over its rocky flanks and grassy lees. In my early morning solitude, with only the wind and waves for company, it was hard to imagine the turmoil that once beset this place.

Further along and above the gently lapping waves of Keil Point are the ruins of the 13th century chapel of Kilcolmkill, dedicated to Columba. On a rocky, natural platform nearby, there are the carved footprints, allegedly once made by the saint who made landfall here before progressing to Iona. Only one of the footprints is actually of ancient origin but this carving was probably here long before Christianity, possibly playing an important role in the inauguration ceremony of a local chieftain.

The southern end of Kintyre is unusual, for it is still theoretically in the Highlands and yet is further south than much of the Lowlands, closer to Ireland than Tarbert, its fields making it more Irish than Scottish. This place has a distinctly on-the-edge feel about it; yet it was here that Scotland first experienced its first human footfall as Mesolithic hunter-gatherers made their dogged way north along the post-glacial west Continental seaboard.

I turned inland through glens of greenery, back to Campbeltown and from there headed north, this time up the east coast of the Mull. I was back on the flank of the Clyde with views of glittering Arran and the Lowlands beyond.

A few miles up the coast lay Saddell Abbey which was founded in the 12th century when local warriors freed Kintyre from Viking tyranny. It was well placed for the glen is lush, sheltered and secluded, the soothing sound of gentle waves breaking on the bay adding to its spiritual credentials. Here sits a glass-panelled shelter housing medieval, Celtic-carved, grave slabs of knights and monks adorned by motifs of ships and otters.

The going is tough for cyclists on this stretch with the hills steep and frequent but the scenery is dramatic with Arran's hills rivalling the Cuillins for splendour. The slowly descending sun chiselled out the deep glens of Catacol and Lochrenza, the latter being my destination for the night.

I had one more trip to make, this time to Skipness Castle, a forgotten fortress whose imposing, five-storeyed tower cuts a commanding profile against the backdrop of Kilbrennan Sound.

Nearby sits the ruins of St. Brendan's chapel with its own collection of carved, ornamental slabs. The two ancient buildings, with the sunset-soaked island hills as a backdrop, plus the unusual spectacle of a sheepdog trial taking place in between, made for a rare atmosphere. The shrill whistles and gruff shouts of the handlers took nothing away from the tranquillity and the moment encapsulated the atmosphere of this place, a land oozing with past glories.