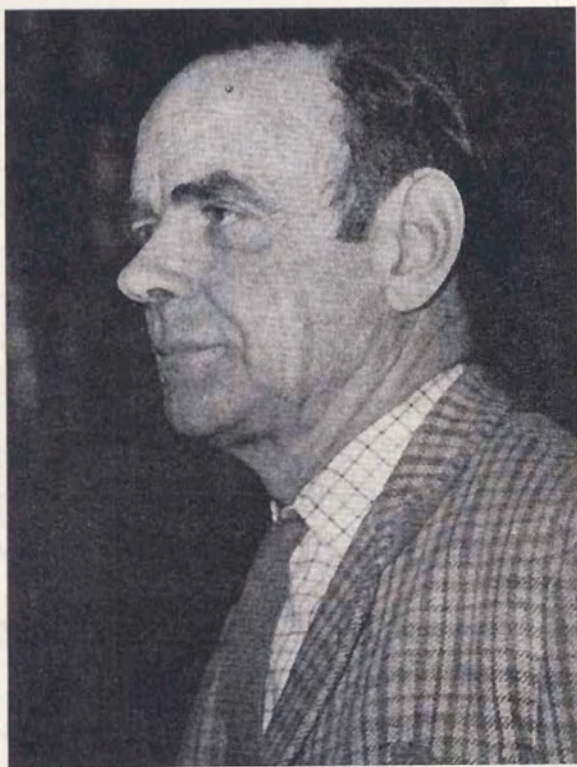


WELCOME TO SUTHERLAND



COL. A. M. GILMOUR

Lord Lieutenant of Sutherland

AS I write this message in advance of the publication of this guide, I am hoping, on behalf of the people here, that the international and national situation will improve so that we can welcome, at the least, the usual number of visitors.

Many visitors return again and again to Sutherland and I hope this guide has been of value to them in the past and will continue to be. I recommend it wholeheartedly to those coming here for the first time. The tours are very well thought out and varied and a selective choice, depending on your taste, will give you a good impression of the county straight away.

Sutherland caters for most tastes but it is primarily the place for an outdoor holiday. I have already said that this guide will help you select tours. It will also help you on other pursuits — fishing, walking, climbing, golf, or perhaps field studies such as geology or bird watching.

If you want to be beside the sea, here, again, there is great variety between the beaches or rocky coasts of East, West and North.

Here, in Sutherland, you will get peace and quiet and tremendous diversity of scenery and occupation on your holiday.

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APOLOGY

We regret that, owing to circumstances beyond our control, the publication date of this county magazine has been delayed and our usual colour reproductions have been slightly curtailed.



Prehistoric relics and monuments of a bygone people

by Elizabeth R. Mackay

Before you set out on your travels to the North of Scotland you may well have searched your public library or asked your local bookseller for a book about the history of Sutherland—in vain. No such book exists. And in this (as in other respects) Sutherland is unique in the United Kingdom. It covers an area of about 2100 square miles, today mostly uninhabited; yet if you know where to look, even in the most desolate places, you can still find traces and reminders of the past as far back as 7000 years ago.

Obviously a short article can do no more than point the way backwards over the centuries and provide a very general outline of a county's history and prehistory, which can literally be seen on the ground.

Your first need is for an Ordnance Survey one-inch map—or, if you are feeling extravagant, the new two-and-a-half-inch. The second is that you make sure that you are not harming anything if you go off the road to explore land where there are no footpaths or tracks. It is an obvious courtesy to ask at the nearest house or croft for permission, which is almost always generously given.

If your particular interest is prehistory, look on your maps for chambered cairns, cairns, earth houses, standing stones, stone circles and rows, cup and/or ring marked stones, brochs, duns, wheelhouses, enclosures, etc. If prehistory is too long ago and too far away for you to mind about, then look for castles, place names, sites of battles.

Remember that as far back as 7000 years ago—i.e., 5000 years before Christ—men and women lived here. They fished and hunted and reared their families here and they left traces of their occupation above the present shore levels along some of the estuaries. Academically labelled 'Mesolithic' people, they dwelt in this county before Neolithic man. It is interesting to realise that their number, in the whole of Scotland, was probably not more than 100.

In succeeding centuries, the population increased with the coming of immigrants from the Western Mediterranean, from the Iberian Peninsula, from Eastern Europe, Holland, Denmark and the Rhineland. Like the earlier Mesolithic inhabitants, they lived, farmed and died here. The great heaps of stones on the hillsides cover the passages and chambers where their dead are buried. Sometimes only the huge stones of the central chamber are revealed. Many of these chambered tombs have a forecourt, partly enclosed by stones set in the shape of a horn, as if final rites and ceremonies were carried out before the body was taken down the passage to be interred in the centre.

Many hundreds of years later, the dead were buried (sometimes after cremation) in long or short cists—i.e., in stone chests (or kists) enclosed by a stone lid.

They lived, died and were buried, these folk of the past. Like us in the twentieth century, they were human beings.

They lived out their lives among their families and their kinsfolk. The details of what crops they grew, what food they ate, what weapons they used, etc., are beyond the scope of this article. But you can still see where some of them lived. The farmers of the Iron Age cleared the stones to make tiny fields for their crops and enclosed them with stone walls. The remainder of the stones were piled in heaps or small cairns and they are dotted along almost any hillside where you care to look. Their homes were hut circles—saucer-like depressions usually on a small plateau—visible today only where a circular wall of stones protrudes above the heather.

A thousand feet above Loch Eriboll is a wheelhouse or a roundhouse. There, in the centre of a stone hut, divided by stone partitions, is a stone hearth with the marks of the fire still to be seen after 2000 years. Some family group lived here, in the most inhospitable, unpropitious area of the county.

There was no need for these roundhouse dwellers to dig out an earth house—an underground passage—to store their crops or hide themselves and their beasts in times of danger. Their homestead was so remote and their land so unproductive that one can only wonder why anyone ever decided to live there.

On other hillsides and by rivers, near hut circles, and sometimes opening directly out of them, these earth houses are to be found. They were probably used temporarily as winter shelters or storehouses or as retreats in times of danger.

Those who lived in this land needed not only homes where they could live peacefully, but defensive positions where they could be safe from their enemies. So they built brochs between the years of about 100 B.C. and 50 A.D. They are superbly placed strategically to form a defence against invaders from the sea or to guard the straths and passes inland. Originally, they stood 30 to 40 feet in height and were built entirely of drystone masonry. They were unroofed, but within the 18-foot thick walls were staircases, guard-chambers, galleries and cell-like rooms. Many of Sutherland's hundred brochs are in ruins. Yet each one of them is worth investigating, if only to be impressed by the architectural skill and industry of those who built them.

There are other defensive buildings to be looked for—

castles, forts and duns. The word "Dun" is used on the Ordnance map for more than one kind of fort. It may be a promontory fort, 200 feet above the sea, connected to the mainland by a narrow ridge of rock and soil. It may be a vitrified fort, where fire has literally melted or vitrified the timber-laced stone walls. It may be a hill fort extending over many acres of high hill top.

Castles come within the period called History, because there is written evidence of their existence and of the people who used them. The Norsemen held their Southernmost land (now Sutherland) by force from about 700 A.D. to 1300 A.D. or even later. Since most of their buildings were of wood, however, what remains of the Viking halls, etc., is now to be found in place names and in old legends.

The one exception is Dornoch Cathedral, a stone building first begun in 1224 A.D., not in any way the work of Norsemen but conceived and brought into being during the Norse occupation of the county. It is the oldest church still in use in Sutherland. Of course, it has suffered over the centuries, but the marks of the masons who worked on it are there for all to see. And the simple beauty of the dignified cluster pillars, together with parts of the nave and choir, are a permanent monument to Gilbert de Moravia, Bishop of the Province of Cat (Caithness and Sutherland), the last of the Scottish Saints.

It is a long way from Mesolithic man to Saint Gilbert, but there is a thread linking the years. It is to be found in man's beliefs—in his religion and his gods, whatever they were. This close connection is literally found in one Christian

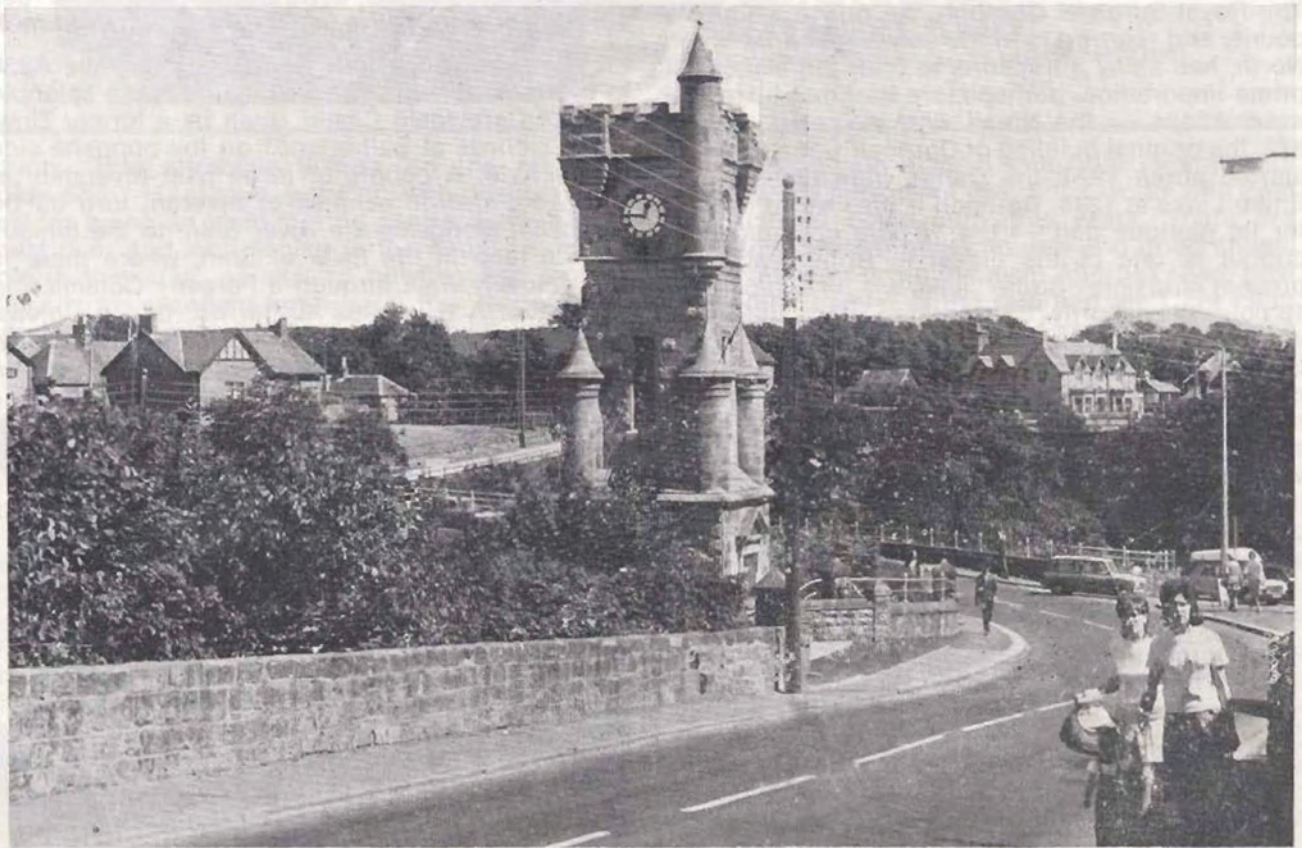
graveyard where a chambered cairn, a cup-marked stone, two stones incised with Christian crosses are all within a few yards of each other, on a spot sacred for thousands of years.

The horned cairns, with their forecourts, may have been used for some religious ceremony. Cup and/or ring marked stones may be associated with magic rites of copper and gold seekers or with sun worship. Standing stones, incised with a Christian cross, are clearly the result of early Christian missionaries reconsecrating old pagan stones.

Of the significance of certain other stones, as yet we do not know enough. There are the beautifully sculptured Symbol Stones of the eighth and ninth century A.D., the work of Pictish artists, with superb interlacing of intricate patterns, and carved pictures of crescents, fish, combs, serpents and mirrors, etc.

There are solitary standing stones, some as high as 11 feet. We know that they are not burial places. They may be boundary marks or indications of routes to be followed; no one can say. And a similar answer must be given to the meaning of the stone rows and stone circles. They may have been places of tribal gatherings, or used for sightings of the sun and moon, or they may indicate holy ground, set aside for worship.

Of one thing I am sure—Sutherland may today be the most sparsely populated county in the British Isles, but its story is as old and as impressive as its countless hills. And in its straths and mountains, if you have a hearing ear and a seeing eye, you can still hear echoes and find traces of the sentient human beings who lived here in the last 7000 years.



A view of part of the main trunk road as it passes through Brora, on the east coast of the county. The clock tower shown is a prominent landmark of this very pleasant village.

SEA ANGLING

by John Woollcombe

ONCE again I have been asked to write about sea fishing in East Sutherland, and this I do with much pleasure and a certain amount of self interest. To start off with—Something has stirred down among the "Kelp Beds"; thanks to some keen sea anglers in Brora area, we now have an East Sutherland Angling Club and so, this year, a hopeful start will be made to exploit the really good sea angling in this district, and I sincerely hope this will help to bring this fine sport within the reach of visitors to this county. It certainly won't solve all the problems, but we already have a team of people who are active sea anglers and can explore this area to find the best places and methods of fishing in the sea from Helmsdale to Dornoch.

On that glorious day when the sea is like glass and one can see thirty feet down in the water, and there is very little tidal stream, then one just does not catch fish, but on a more blustery day, with the wind and tide taking the boat quite quickly over the sea bed, then the fishing is excellent—using fly lines and rippers. I have been broken about eight times by big fish but, with two good cod on at once, the first few minutes are really exciting, even with heavy gear, which is essential if one is fishing with some commercial object in mind. One day I was completely dumbfounded when Joe, using a sharp but very slender hook (which I would have used with a worm during my grandson's initial effort to catch trout), baited with mussel, landed one of the best cod I have seen this autumn.

It was a miracle, but it does show that, if you are at sea for sport, quite light gear may be successful. One or two very exciting days did come about during calm weather when we saw flocks of gulls and other sea birds practically fighting over a shoal of sprats, which had clearly been driven up to the surface by larger fish; once in the middle of this sort of turmoil, sport was fast and furious until the larger fish dispersed or moved away. Cod, ling, saithe, mackerel and coal fish could all be caught under these conditions—certainly the mackerels were the biggest I have ever seen off Scotland. The feathers were taken half-way down to the sea bed and even just below the surface, so, in these rare conditions, calm weather is an advantage. Very often the cod and ling are in small shoals amongst the lobster creels, because, of course, lobsters are always found on a rocky sea bed and good cod and ling also like the same sort of conditions.

We have not yet landed any real monsters, but talking to Derek McKillop, who skippers a highly successful hand-line boat, when they first started fishing in the Pentland Firth they saw a lot of large halibut, which followed a hooked cod right up to the surface, not quite daring to take it. Thus, if you must have a monster, try hooking a codling with a sizeable hook just behind the head and then drift with this

live bait just off the bottom—you may well become famous! The Scottish record still stands at 152 lb., caught from Stromness.

I have at least seen a shark off Helmsdale, but I have stuck to my commercial object and tried to get quantity rather than one or two specimen fish. The size of ling and saithe has gone well up as a result of my efforts this autumn, but a 12 lb. cod in the boat is still quite a good fish.

I now briefly explain a sure method of catching fish in this area. A cheap boat rod is needed, with a reel capable of carrying at least 100 yards of 40 lb. line—use Mono filament if you wish. Bait is not necessary; use a six-foot nylon gut cast with two droppers, on which are tied two large sea flies or silver spoons, if you can get them; the hooks should be strong; to take this to the sea bed use a lead weight which must be at least six ounces or a nine-ounce ripper with two bright silvered hooks which move freely on silk cord; rove through the bottom. The boat is allowed to drift with the wind and tidal stream over stoney or hard sea bed, the best depth being 10 fathoms or more. Pay out this line until the weight or ripper is just on the bottom and then keep the weight bouncing on the sea bed by lifting and lowering the point of the rod. Violent motion is not good—and not necessary. If you catch up in the bottom, which is, alas, only too common, go up wind and tide for 50 yards at least, then the hooks can frequently be pulled clear without loss. The good fish are in small shoals, so a sea mark is often useful. On a favourable day six to ten stone of really valuable fish can be caught.

Off this coast, the sea is comparatively shallow and has a very mild tidal stream, so, if you are an expert bait fisherman, you will get exceptional sport on quite light tackle. Last summer, I saw many fishermen catching tiny fish from one of the local harbours; to these people I would like to say that there are far, far better things just over a mile out by boat—do try it in 1974!

Sutherland has many miles of coastline and many good harbours on the west coast, where it has a thriving fishing industry at Lochinver and Kinlochbervie. There are, clearly, great possibilities for sea fishing in all these areas. It will take many years for one person to assess the whole coastline of Sutherland, many parts of which have enormous and very exciting sea angling potential.

WHY NOT HAVE

"THE ONE THAT DIDN'T GET AWAY"

SMOKED BY US?

A. G. CAMPBELL

FISH MERCHANT

GOLSPIE

Tel : 255