

Scotland's East Coast and Deeside

1 Aberdeen, Dundee, the East Neuk and the Falkirk Wheel

A three day wander from Aberdeen to Edinburgh – March 2014

Day 1 Aberdeen and Dundee

A direct train journey by from Durham to Aberdeen, arriving at 1pm in time for a drink of lunch. For those who don't know the route it's an excellent journey – in addition to Edinburgh and both the Forth and Tay Bridges there are coastal views for much of the journey with highlights at Alnmouth, Lindisfarne, Berwick and the cliffs



Footdee, Aberdeen

to the north, the Firths of Forth and Tay, Lunan Bay and Stonehaven.

We decided on a walk round to get the feel of the place. Out of the station and within a minute we are at the harbour which, unlikely many, is busy and noisy – lots of boats connected with the oil industry, plus the Shetland Ferry. We walked to the old, planned fishing village of Footdee via the harbourside, past a marine scrapyards with huge rusting chains and anchors, to the mouth of the River Dee, reaching the huge new coastguard station, looking like an airport control tower. Plenty of information panels around describing how much it, its predecessors and various monuments cost to build, to the penny (sorry to reinforce the stereotype). Walked along the beach – despite it being early March it was a clear, sunny day with the temperature hitting double figures, so we weren't the only ones. Past a rundown retail park occupying the prime site on the front, then into town for a quick look at Marischal College, with the granite glittering in the sun (just a little bit of imagination required) and time for lunch.

The Prince of Wales, in a lane off the main drag, Union Street, is the first stop. A bit tarted up since I was last there, with a proper menu rather than gloops of stovies. The beer was good, but the current menu didn't appeal, so we made do with a bratwurst from a stand outside. Then into The Grill, on Union St itself, largely unchanged since the 1920s (except for the addition of a ladies toilet in the 1990s as it leapt into the modern world). Finally, on the way back to the station, a new pub

for me, Aitchies Ale House, unchanged since the 1990s, but still doing a good job as a proper Scottish pub, with bar staff who know their job – everyone spotted as they arrived and table service if you wished.

Back on the train to Dundee and our base for the next two nights in the Travelodge. Off the train to find that the area around the station had been demolished – the leisure centre, Tayside House, aka Fawly Towers, and the concrete elevated walkways linking the 1970s horrors had all gone. Nothing there to replace them yet....but I presume they are working on it.

The Travelodge is in an old jute mill next to, of all things, a 24hour gym. When I lived in Dundee (oh God...it's thirty years ago) the concept of late night entertainment did not involve that sort of exercise, but maybe I was missing something. The old jute mill area, seems to still be struggling to find a new purpose....a lot of gap sites remain and, from our window, a new building plonked in the middle which looked as though it was based on the design for a bouncy castle. (Checked it out on Streetview, and it turns out to be a mosque....and the design then makes a lot more sense...oops).

In the evening we wandered up the Perth Road, little changed in thirty years.....maybe even more studenty..... and into Mennies (aka the Speedwell Bar), definitely unchanged, then back towards the hotel via the Phoenix. Passed a chip shop selling deep fried Mars Bars... whoever thought that up first as a sales gimmick, which went viral around the world, has a lot to answer for. Stories from the landlord of the Phoenix about the licensed trade over the past 30 years, and tales of Dundee. He was amazed and incredulous that the city has applied to be City of Culture, then gave a whole list of reasons why it should be. It's not just McGonagall and the Sunday Post.

Day 2 The East Neuk

We walked through Dundee city centre, past the home of the Beano and Dandy, to the bus station and off to St Andrews and then to Crail. A walk round the village – nostalgic, I spent most of my childhood family holidays here –



was the beach really that small. Then on to the Fife Coastal Path, starting with the classic view of Crail Harbour (pictured). If Beadnell is the only West facing harbour on the East coast of England is Crail the only one on the East coast of Scotland? After an hour and a bit, with good views over to the Isle of May, and the East Lothian coast just visible through the heat-haze (this is early March!) we reach Cellardyke. The harbour is deserted but part of the harbour wall is still in use as a drying green. Lots of evidence in the building styles here, and throughout the East Neuk of Fife, of the

close trading and cultural links with the Netherlands. A pint in the Haven, sitting outside in the beer garden, and then on to Anstruther and lunch. A fish supper from the award winning Anstruther Fish Bar, where 'your fish today was caught by the MV.....'(is it the same boat every day?), and it was excellent.

Then a walk through town and a pint in the Dreeel Inn, a nice old pub, some more tales of Dundee from the landlady who came from there, then back to the harbour and the Ship Inn, a fine boozier full of characters.



From Anstruther we caught the bus back to St Andrews, walked round the town past the castle, to the ruined cathedral (left). In many ways it is similar to Durham – with the University dominating the town – which means that there's much more going on that most places its size. We managed the Criterion Bar in South Street – nice atmosphere -

and the Central Bar in Market St (a wee bit pretentious, but excellent selection of beer and knowledgeable staff). Poured ourselves on to the bus back to Dundee, and some drink and food in the Counting House – a Wetherspoons pub. I was trying to find another pub but walked past it because, in my dotage, I confused the street names.

Day 3 The Falkirk Wheel



Off by train from Dundee to Stirling, then to Falkirk Grahamston. A short walk to the town centre bus stances and on to the bus for the Falkirk Wheel. A tour of Falkirk en route, via solid stone villas, 30s bungalows, then through the nice housing scheme, then the grotty scheme, then the crap end of the grotty scheme, then down a lane and into the car park. Quite a bizarre entrance to a major attraction...but I suppose most people don't arrive by the No.3. The Wheel itself is amazing. It was my second visit to the site, but this time we had booked a boat trip on the Wheel.

The Falkirk Wheel ‘the world’s only rotating boat lift’. It links the Forth and Clyde Canal with the Union Canal, replacing a long-demolished flight of locks, and was completed in 2002, as part of a Millennium programme to reopen the Central Scotland canal work. It isn’t easy to describe so the photographs have to do it. Well worth a visit. Check out the website for some of the facts.



The boat trip on the good ship Archimedes lasts just under an hour. Worked out why the Wheel can’t be seen from the main Edinburgh – Glasgow railway line, and discovered where the previous route of the flight of locks was. Quite bizarre on the return boat journey, heading onto the Wheel and coming to a stop within a couple of feet of a long drop into nothingness.

Back into Falkirk and a brief stop at the Wheatsheaf Inn, a nice pub up a lane off the High St, followed by the train into Edinburgh, a couple of hours in our favourite haunts, then on to Durham and into the Colpitts, the end point of any journey worth the name.

Practicalities

This is an easy trip by train. The direct morning Durham – Aberdeen train is at an ideal time. Scotrail services may not be luxury, but they are pretty frequent – 2 each hour between Aberdeen and Dundee and between Stirling, Falkirk Grahamston and Edinburgh, and hourly between Dundee and Stirling. Back from Edinburgh to Durham on the 1830 East Coast train with First Class Advance Singles so some free food and a whisky to round off the trip.

We had thought about spending the 2 nights in St. Andrews, but accommodation is expensive (often very expensive...too many Americans wanting a round of golf on the Old Course) and Dundee makes a good alternative.

On day 2 we used a Stagecoach Fife Plus day ticket (£10 in 2014) which brings good savings over expensive single fares. Buses run every 10 minutes between Dundee and St Andrews (30 mins evening and Sunday), hourly between St Andrews and Anstruther via Crail, and hourly direct (Mon-Sat daytimes) between Anstruther and

St Andrews. The ticket itself covers the Stagecoach Fife network – most of the buses throughout Fife and onwards to Edinburgh, Dundee and Stirling– a good deal for trips in the area.

On day 3 the bus to the Falkirk Wheel is the No 3, heading Westbound on Newmarket St, about 7 mins walk from Falkirk Grahamston station, every 15 mins. An alternative route for those visiting the Wheel from Glasgow and Edinburgh is to take the train to Falkirk High Station (every 15 mins) and walk along the Union Canal towpath to the Wheel.

We booked the boat trip on the wheel in advance online at www.thefalkirkwheel.co.uk . It wasn't very busy when we were there but it does book up in advance at busy times. The visitor centre at the Wheel does a nice line in tacky souvenirs.

2 A brief visit to Deeside - October 2014

This was a quick recce of Deeside when I had two days spare in October – chosen because I hadn't been there before, apart from a drive straight through, travelling the long way round from Aberdeen to Perth via Braemar, almost forty years ago.

Day 1 Outward

Once more by direct train from Durham to Aberdeen arriving at lunchtime. Then on to the 201 bus from Union Square Bus Station for the two-and-a-quarter hour trip to Braemar. It gives a good introduction to the granite houses and tenements of various ages as it passes west through Aberdeen, then through the series of upmarket Victorian suburbs strung along the former Deeside railway line to Culter. On to Banchory, with modern suburban development pretending to be rural. Round the houses in Banchory, and then through more rural country, entering the Cairngorms National Park, where the countryside becomes more Highland in character. Through Aboyne and Ballater, past the Balmoral estate and finally the bus reaches Braemar.

Time for a quick look round in the drizzle. Obviously a lot of good walking opportunities round about but the village itself is bit of a tourist trap and twee. The Hungry Highlander Fusion Cuisine takeaway sounded interesting, but it was closed and I wasn't able to check whether they sold haggis pakora, and the gift and sporan shops didn't appeal. Time for a couple of pints in the large lounge bar of the Fife Arms Hotel, which acts as the local pub. Not so special that it would be worth going out of the way for...but it was welcoming and friendly. Then back on the bus to Ballater.

I chose Ballater for the overnight stop, partly because of the good bus service but largely because it had a couple of entries in the Good Beer Guide. I stayed in one of them, the Alexandra Hotel which is a fine example of a comfortable, friendly and inexpensive small hotel with good bar meals and beer in the lounge bar and a full breakfast cooked to order in the morning.

Out for a couple of pints. The Balmoral Bar appears to be the main boozier. It's OK, though when I was in, it was dominated by a few people watching footie on the telly. Any character has been modernised away, though there are some interesting old photos and posters on the walls). Then the Glenaden Hotel, also known as the Barrels, the other entry in the Beer Guide. Quiet on a Monday night, but friendly and two interesting real ales on both new to me, and both about 5%ABV. I was persuaded to try both.

Day 2 Return

In the morning I had a good look round Ballater. It feels more like a proper place than elsewhere on Deeside. It's a planned town, solid without being too self-satisfied, self-contained with a good range of local shops, a butcher to die for and a Co-op. Ballater is where the Queen does her shopping when she is at Balmoral – I spotted her favourite Chinese takeaway, off licence and chemist, but not her favourite charity shop.



It is also excellent walking country with a number of local marked routes. I only had time for a short walk to Bridge of Gairn then back via the riverside path, as a taster of what is available. I would be happy to return, and to use Ballater as a base.



The royal takeaway and off-licence, Ballater

Then back onto the 201, with a first stop at Aboyne. A bit of a snooty collection of large houses, as far away from Aberdeen as the merchant classes could commute in Victorian times, and lacking in any real character. Had a pint in the Boat Inn, situated by a bridge over the Dee....on first appearance it is more of a restaurant, but there is a public bar round the side. It has been comprehensively modernised but the beer is good.

Then to Banchory. Though it is an older town, it feels more like a fairly well off suburb of Aberdeen, and there was not a lot to see or do on a Tuesday lunchtime. The public bar of the Douglas Arms is in Beer Guide, and through the window looks like a fine old boozier. However it doesn't open until mid-afternoon, so I had a pint in the Burnett Arms across the road...friendly enough, but I was definitely by far the most sober person in there at 2pm.

Finally back to Aberdeen, and a couple of drinks (see the Prince of Wales and Aitchies Ale House above) then on to the 1818 train to Durham. On a cheap first class advance ticket this time, so benefitted from the free food and drink – twice, because there is a crew change at Edinburgh. On the final leg the crew were keen for me to finish the bottle of red wine, rather than throw the remains away at the end of the day. So I obliged and poured off the train at Durham.

Practicalities

The Deeside bus service is good for a rural area. The 201/202/203 Stagecoach Bluebird service, runs from Aberdeen every half hour as far as Banchory, every hour as far as Ballater and every two hours to Braemar. There are some gaps on schooldays as buses divert to serve school students. Aberdeen Bus Station is part of the Union Square shopping centre, which is adjacent to the railway station. Single fares are expensive – a single from Aberdeen to Braemar is £11. A day ticket is £13.80 and worth it if doing anything more than a single journey.