

Scotland 2011-Waiting for Katia

The day before we left MK was beautiful and sunny but the forecast for departure day was very ominous with flood warnings for London! As it turned out the weather was not as bad as they said it would be. OK it was damp as we readied the caravan for the off but far from being the monsoon we were promised! The journey to Durham was long for us at just under 220 miles. The M1 is always busy but also strangely in parts it seemed very quiet. The extra lanes that have been built in recent years also make a real difference. We stopped at three lots of services and apart from Leicester Forest East, where you park with the wagons, we use dedicated caravan parking such as it is. At Woodall it was just one row of previous car parking spaces converted for caravans. At Wetherby it looked as if some thought had been giving to caravan parking provision. There was also room, perhaps because it was some way from the toilets!

We arrived at The Grange Caravan Club site at Durham a little before 3.00pm. Whilst the welcome was friendly the instructions seemed a bit bizarre. If we chose a hardstanding we could pitch how we liked but everything, including satellite dishes must be contained within the hardstanding. However if you select a grass pitch you must pitch centre of van to the peg. The reason for not putting a satellite dish on the grass if you have a hardstanding is that members get annoyed when they are moved for grass cutting. We did not discuss what happens when they want to have a satellite dish on a grass pitch and whether there was a requirement to have the grass under it mown. I suppose it makes the Caravan Club rather surreal, a bit like being in a Monty Python sketch!

Wednesday 24th September. Originally we only planned to stay two days at Durham but we booked an extra day so that we could visit the Beamish Museum, especially as its only about 12 miles from the campsite. I suppose we got there just after 11.00am and there was a pretty big queue snaking around the front entrance. Lesson learnt, if you know that you will be visiting buy your tickets online to bypass the queue. When you buy the tickets they will convert them into an annual pass at no extra charge so good value for those living within easy travelling distance. Whilst we were in the queue Margaret offered a lady with a young son a tissue as he was spluttering after getting a bit excited! They started chatting and it turns out that although they are English they live in New York and she visits England during the long American school holiday.

Beamish is more like an historical theme park than a museum, I don't say that in a nasty way but history is a live medium at Beamish not a list of relics. For a start there is a tramway right around the museum site which allows visitors to be dropped off at each exhibition point. They have several different trams running at any one time. There are also some old buses including one with a spiral staircase to the upper, open deck. One of the buses also has a hydraulic lift built so that wheel chair users can get round the site more easily. It was the tram we used to get us to the 'The Town'. It's important to mention that nothing you see at Beamish was originally there, it has all been imported from around the North East of England. One of the founding ideas of Beamish is to preserve the North East way of life as it once was. The Town is no exception with some lovely reconstructed buildings including a row of terraced houses which you can visit and go from house to house with rooms illustrating how people lived and their furnishings. There is a traditional Pub and an intriguing Co-Operative store where you can still see things that were around in my childhood! There is a park and a grandstand which is well used by visitors as a lunch stop for a picnic. Or you can do as we did eat in the Tea Shop. I had something called a saveloy, this was contained in a bread roll with stuffing! I had to be quick to stop the young lady covering it with gravy, what is it about northerners and gravy? Anyway to me it tasted like an American hot dog and looked like one.

From The Town we moved onto the Pit Village and Colliery which was very interesting, particularly the Pit Cottages with their lovely vegetable gardens. In all the houses we visited I don't think I saw one bed that looked remotely comfortable! Also as part of the village were a school and Methodist Chapel. If you want you can visit the Drift Mine but we passed on that one. From the Colliery we walked to the Pockerley Waggon Way where there is an opportunity to ride a train pulled by a replica steam locomotive. From the Waggon Way it's only a short walk to Pockerley Old Hall which again you can go into or just sit in the small formal gardens. By now we were getting a bit tired so we got the tram back to the entrance, visited the shop and then made our way back to the campsite. Beamish is a good day out for young or old.

Overnight we had very heavy rain which woke us up. Fortunately by the morning it had cleared up although still cloudy so we decided to go and fill up with diesel and a little shopping. By lunchtime it was much brighter so we decided to visit the City of Durham. We like to use public transport rather than relying on taking the car into city centres if possible. Not far from the site is one of three Park and Rides which serve Durham. Luckily we had our bus passes so it cost us nothing.

When we got to Durham we walked along the river opposite the Castle and Cathedral to see the famous view from the weir. We then re-crossed the river and walked up to the old town and into magnificent Norman Durham Cathedral which was started in 1093 and took about 40 years in total to build. Strangely for once we did not have to pay to wander round which is increasingly unusual. As we always find when we visit anywhere there is always work going on and the area around the Cathedral and Castle was no different. We walked down to the Market Square which looked as if it had recently had a rather nice makeover. Off the Square is a fascinating covered market. Apart from the Market it was a shop free afternoon, not sure how I got away with that! We set off to find the bus but found ourselves at the wrong bus stop, fortunately some friendly natives put us right and we made our way back to the campsite. During our stay the campsite has been pretty busy but never completely full although I expect it will be for the weekend.

Friday and we are moving further north today to Edinburgh. As we packed up it started to rain and by the time we were going around Newcastle it was pouring. We saw a lorry on the opposite carriageway in the outside lane throwing an arched heavy spray of water over both the north bound lanes. This spray went right over the car and caravan! As we got further north the weather did improve. It's rather surprising that given the A1 is one of the two main routes into Scotland that it is still a two way road for quite some distance. It also hugs the coast for some way. We had set the route for the journey on TomTom but he wanted to take us to the site from the eastern suburbs of Edinburgh whilst the Caravan Club instructions were to approach from the western end of the City by-pass. So in the time honoured way we switched TomTom off until we were well round the by-pass. When we switched him on again he seemed to be following the same instructions as the Club. However this did not last for long! Although we were being told to turn left it was too early and we ended up going down a road leading away from the campsite! Fortunately there was a roundabout and we were able to retrace our steps and eventually approached the site from the wrong direction. But we got there in the end. The site full signs were up as we arrived, just as well we had booked. Walking around the site in the evening I found one free pitch which tends to contradict those that suggest there are always lots of no shows on Caravan Club sites. Something else I noticed was, what seemed to me, a large number of big American style RV's, some of them the size of a Shearing's coach! I think I counted around 14 or 15 of them. Earlier we had walked to the bus stop to check how long it would take and I reckon it's a 10/15 minute walk at a steady pace but we will leave the bus for another day.

Saturday and the Grand Prix season restarts with the Belgium GP and today was a wet qualifying with Vettel on pole again but will he convert it into a win? Have to wait until tomorrow to get the answer to that. After the qualifying we drove out to Leith to visit The Royal Yacht Britannia which

forms a permanent museum as part of the new Ocean Terminal Shopping Centre and is only a few miles from the campsite. I have always thought that Britannia had beautiful lines for a ship of her size. Once you have purchased your tickets you make your way to the ship but just before you enter you are given an audio device into which you key in numbers that are dotted around the ship and the commentary explains that part of the ship. Britannia was built in 1953 and replaced a previous Royal Yacht and is likely to be that last of a long line of ships going back into history. The tour gives an interesting insight into life of board and had it not been British it's unlikely you could make it up! For most of its service it has had an Admiral in charge. Given that it's a lot smaller than the average cross channel ferry that seems a bit excessive! There was also a crew of more than 200. There was a strict hierarchy with the officers having their rather nice rest room and dining room, then the petty officers mess and for here we change from cocktail cabinet to beer pumps. The sailors (called yachtsmen on Britannia) and the Marines share very cramped quarters further below and have to make do with the NAAFI. The 'Royal' areas are tastefully elegant without being excessively opulent. Many famous world leaders have either stayed or been guests on board the Britannia. The final part of the tour takes you to the engine room which whilst you can't go in they have provided large windows looking down into the room, it was absolutely immaculate. Britannia had a dual role as it was designed to be converted to a hospital ship if the need arose and there is a sick bay and an operating theatre. Although it was once used to rescue people from Aden it never was used for its second role. On board is also a large laundry for both crew and royals, although any royal washing was always done on a different day to the rest!

The weather forecast was only too right today, wet and windy. At least we had the Grand Prix when the wind wasn't blowing the dish out of alignment! Anyway it was a good Grand Prix and Vettel managed to win for the first time in quite a few races with Mark Webber 2nd. JB had a stella drive from 13th on the grid to 3rd at the chequered flag. Apart from polishing dirty marks off the side of the van between showers it was otherwise a lazy day.

The weather was a little kinder today but not much but at least it was dry and the sun did try to come out a couple of times. We visited Edinburgh today. There is a mini bus service run directly from the campsite which saves the hassle of a 15 minute walk to the nearest bus stop since the Council/Bus company decided in their wisdom to put an end to a previous service from nearer the campsite. In Europe this would have been unheard of, campsites in major cities always have bus stops near the entrance. The mini bus is a bit more expensive at £5 each return but at least we had a running commentary on local points of interest like Fettes College which doubles as Harry Potter's Hogwarts. Also we drove by the school used in the filming of the Pride of Miss Jean Broady. We were dropped off at the top end of Princes Street not far from the Caledonian Hotel. We walked along Princes Street admiring the non-existent tram system! It seems that the Council have made a big mistake in the way that they set up the project so that the Council takes all the financial risks rather than appointing a Civil Engineering company to complete the project and take the risks. Even if the scheme goes ahead it seems that it will be a much truncated system from the one originally conceived.

Enough of local politics, time for a coffee at John Lewis which was on our route to Holyrood House and the new Scottish Parliament Building. We passed the Burns Memorial en route and cut down through a park towards Holyrood House. It was not our intention to go in but just wanted a glimpse at the outside. The new Parliament is just across the road. Its modern design makes it a very striking building which I am sure does not find favour with all but modern architecture can polarise opinions. Visitors are allowed to look round the inside of the building but you have to go through the normal security procedures you find in all Government buildings. I was surprised, when I asked, to be told that I could take photographs inside providing I did not take one of the Queens portrait! The Parliament chamber is very impressive with good use of wood and natural light.

Immediately outside the building is the start of the Royal Mile that leads up to the Castle. It is this thoroughfare that is linked with a lot of the activities of the world famous Edinburgh Festival. If you are lucky you will also come across some free entertainment. It is quite a slog up to the Castle. The Edinburgh Tattoo is held on the Esplanade immediately in front of the Castle entrance. From here we went down towards the Scottish National Gallery and back to Princes Street. Hungry by now we had lunch at Bella Italia before making our way back to the pick-up point for the mini bus. Edinburgh is always worth a visit as there is always something going on, particularly in August although I am sure the locals long for September!

Tuesday and our last full day in Edinburgh. During the morning we decided to follow the exit route from the campsite for tomorrow's journey. We then drove out to South Queensferry to have a look at the Forth Rail Bridge. On the way back we stopped on Marine Drive to view the Esplanade that runs along the shore in front of the campsite. After lunch it was time to stock up with food and fuel. On our trip into Edinburgh yesterday the mini bus driver pointed out a new Morrisons not far from the campsite. I am not usually a fan of that group but have to say this was a nice supermarket.

The last day of August and weather wise it may as well be the last day of October! We are heading north today to Culloden which is a few miles south of Inverness. We managed to exit Edinburgh from the campsite the way we should have arrived and in no time we were heading across the Forth Road Bridge. Once past Sterling the route was almost all on the A9 which is a mixture of dual carriageway but mainly two way road. I noticed that all the laybys were numbered which I thought was a good idea if you were unfortunate to breakdown. I did not feel it was that busy but that could well depend on the day and the season. It takes you through some really beautiful rugged countryside. We arrived at the Caravan Club site called Culloden Moor by early afternoon. The first thing we do after setting up is to text the boys saying we had arrived. No chance here, absolutely no mobile signal. I tried to use the campsite pay phone, the first one I have used for many years. There was a minimum charge of 60p!!! What happened to 3 old pennies with A and B buttons! Managed to set up the satellite dish but the elevation is completely different to down south as the dish is increasingly upright, if not slightly downwards. Decided to drive into the outskirts of Inverness to see if we could make our calls as no idea if BT phone box call got through as it demanded more money seconds after connecting. Had only gone a few miles when phone burst into life and confirmation that call had got through. Site is fairly full although there is still space. Quite a few Germans here in both caravans and motorhome. Apparently they all ask for WeFi which is unfortunately not available on this site.

Thursday 1st September. The morning was spent doing mainly chores like washing and changing a gas cylinder. The sky was not looking promising as far as the washing was concerned but it was high cloud with the promise of it breaking up a bit. In the afternoon we risked leaving the washing out and headed for Nairn which prove to be a nice little seaside town on the Moray Firth. Earlier in the day I had lost a screw out of my glasses so the first task was to find an Optician. We tried Boots first as it was a Boots group optician where I originally purchased them but the Boots in Nairn was no more than a chemist shop. We had passed an opticians whilst looking for somewhere to park so we made our way there. The kind lady put a new screw in for me and refused any payment. So if anyone needs new glasses in Nairn check out McLean's Opticians. Having sorted that problem we made our way towards the harbour. The old part around the harbour is called Fishertown and consists of neat tightly packed small cottages. We sort of walked around the perimeter of Fishertown ending up on the coastal park. I have to say that everyone we passed spoke so the folk round here are certainly friendly. We found the harbour although now it would be regarded as a marina as there is not a fishing boat in sight. Apparently the harbour was designed and built by Thomas Telford the famous civil engineer and builder of many bridges and canals. On the far side of the harbour wall is a fine sandy beach. From Nairn we visited Port George although we did not go into the inner sanctum as that required an entrance fee!! Port George is a fortified army base which still has canons in place of

the ramparts. Unlike a traditional castle the fortifications are far more complex with several lines of defence to make attack a pretty risky business.

Friday, there was at least some sunshine this morning, hardly hot but warmer than it has been. The high clouds are still there albeit thinning out from time to time to reveal blue sky. Some of the skies we have had have been quite dramatic. This afternoon we drove over the Kessock Bridge to visit the Black Isle which sits between the Firths of Moray and Cromarty. Our first stop was at Avoch which has a small harbour. From here we drove onto Fortrose and Rosemarkie. Continuing further on we eventually reach Cromarty which sits on one side of the narrow entrance into the Cromarty Firth. As we approached the road was high up and we could see over the Firth and saw the evidence, of what seemed to be, a past construction place for North Sea oil rigs. Those that are left in the Firth were pretty rusty so it's an assumption on my part that construction is not current. I appreciate that it's important to have employment opportunities in these remote communities but it completely messes up what was once a beautiful view across the water. Cromarty has some interesting nooks and crannies but no heart just a maze of narrow roads. The only apparent café was closed on Fridays! I don't know how many visitors a place like Cromarty gets on any one day but there does seem a complete lack of tourist facilities, except for a portacabin toilet! Cup of tea less we made our way home along the north shore on the island and for some way it hugs the water's edge. We got ourselves back to the A9 and made our way back across the Kessock Bridge and through Inverness and back to the campsite. The campsite does not seem to have had the rush of newcomers I would have imagined for the weekend. Perhaps the darker evenings put people off rushing off after work?

Saturday and we decided to visit the Culloden Battlefield today as it's virtually on our doorstep. It's supposed to be only a mile away but as it took us 35 minutes to walk back I think it could be a bit longer than that. The National Trust of Scotland have a large visitor centre at the site which explains the background to the battle. The main protagonist was Bonnie Prince Charlie! It's easy to assume that this was just another England-Scotland rematch at Wembley but it's a bit more complicated than that. Of course religion is involved as well as Scotland controlling its own destiny. Prince Charles led what was known as the Jacobite uprising in order to reinstate an absolute monarchy on England and Scotland and the reinstatement of the Stuarts. Even when he captured Edinburgh he showed no interest in recalling the Scottish Parliament. In England things were different in the sense that we had the makings of a constitutional monarchy which meant that the crown and Parliament had to work together so that was at risk should the Bonnie Prince have been successful. Initially the Jacobites had some success defeating the English at a couple of important battles. It was these defeats that forced the English to rethink tactics and it was the implementation of this training that spelt the end of the Jacobite hopes. Walking around the battlefield one could have sympathy for both sides in terms of the terrain they had to battle through. The marked lines of the opposing sides also seemed close to each other. At the end of the day, or perhaps one should say one hour as that is the time the battle actually took, the English had the upper hand in tactics employed and vanquished the opposition. The escape of Bonnie Prince Charlie is now a matter of folklore and he returned to France as a hero.

Sunday 4th September. The day dawned much brighter with more blue sky than cloud, however it was still chilly. This is our last full day at Culloden so, given the weather, with thought it only right to get out and see a bit more of the surrounding countryside. We decided to drive out along Loch Ness to Drumnadrochit. Not long after leaving Inverness we saw a sign to the Caledonian Canal so we took a detour. There was a lock and we watched a couple of craft go through en route to the Loch. Further on we stopped to take some photos. At Drumnadrochit we stopped at the visitor centre to look at the shops. Being something of a non-believer regarding all things 'Nessie' we did not go into the actual visitor centre! From here we took the A832 and then the A833 towards Beauly Firth. The initial stages of the road over the heathland were resplendent in heather of pinks and purple. Far nicer to see in its natural environment rather than in a pot at the local garden centre! The road

runs along the side of Beaully Firth and we did manage to find a parking spot with the view over to the Kessock Bridge. On the way back to the campsite we stopped at Tesco's for shopping and to fill up with fuel. It's the only supermarket fuel station I have seen where there is a notice advising caravanners which pumps to use. From the supermarket we took a small detour through the actual village of Culloden. There has clearly been a lot of house building going on with many of them having views over Moray Firth.

Monday. Rain overnight and when we got up and it looked like a soggy departure. By the time we left the rain had lightened a bit but the clouds were still hanging over the surrounding hills. As we drove towards Inverness we could see much brighter conditions over the Moray Firth and once over the Kessock Bridge things improved all the way north. As we approached the bridge there was a caravan ahead going at perhaps 50/55 miles an hour. As we went up the hill the other side of the bridge I decided that I would overtake. As I was almost alongside he suddenly put his foot down and increased his speed and more worrying he pulled right over to the line which seemed somewhat irresponsible. I had no wish to be involved in an accident so I eased off and pulled back in behind. It seems odd to me that a fellow caravanner would react like that. Further up the A9 where it cuts across country towards Thurso I noticed some way behind me a caravan shortening the distance between us quite quickly. Rather than risk him overtaking on a not very good road surface I pulled into a layby only to see him disappear into the distance. Talking about the A9 it's a sort of curate's egg, good in parts. There are some new sections, although not much in the way of dual carriageway north of Inverness. However you do have to say that it transverses some fantastic countryside in the 100 miles from Inverness to Thurso although there are a few sections not for the faint hearted! When we arrived at the Caravan Club's Dunnet Bay site Reception was closed. There were however strict instructions on how to pitch the caravan on pain of being told that you may be asked to move your outfit. Not only was there a rear pitch peg but also a front stud where the jockey wheel of the unit had to be. I just wonder what the state of mind is of people who make up all these rules? Being someone who tries to obey such rules it does rile me when I see some people completely disregard the instructions and do they appear to be reprimanded, of course not. Of course there need to be rules but I am not sure members should be treated as idiots! The Club still has a lot of lightening up to do. As Reception did not open until 4.00pm we decided to have a run out to Dunnet Head, the most northerly point of the UK mainland, which is about 5 miles from the site (by road). The road is interesting as it virtually all single track road with passing places and it bends up the hills past small lakes right up to the viewpoint near the lighthouse. If you only look out to sea from the car park you miss a trick. Better to walk up the hill behind the car park to another viewpoint on the brow of the hill. From here you can see round in all directions and some magnificent views.

Tuesday, we awoke to bright sunshine but unfortunately it did not last and rain returned on and off for most of the day. In fact as I sit writing this at 11.00pm it is blowing a gale outside and we have already taken the satellite dish down as a precaution. Funnily enough the site is quite full tonight with quite a few new arrivals. It does beg the question on whether it was necessary to book all the campsites on this trip as with the exception of Edinburgh there has been room on all the other sites we have stayed at so far.

We had a pretty lazy morning as we could not make up our mind what the weather would do and I suspect in this part of the world you never would predict that! Anyway, after lunch, we decided to risk a trip out. We stopped at Castletown, about 2 miles from the campsite, to check out the fish and chip shop. From here we visited Thurso and Scrabster. Neither places seemed particularly picturesque and we did not stop. Scotland seems to have a lot of grey houses which I feel makes the place look rather depressing. I would want to get out there with the Sandtex and paint them different colours! We also seem to be in the land of enhanced fuel prices with a 6/8p premium not being uncommon. Many of the fuel stations up here don't display prices which I thought was required by law, perhaps it only applies to England.

Despite the weather Margaret felt she needed to do some more washing but we had to wait until Reception opened at 4.00pm to get some change. As the washing was being loaded who should pop into the laundry was a Dutch lady I had spoken to at the Edinburgh site!

Wednesday, what an awful night, gale force winds buffeting the caravan and heavy rain. Although I don't think we were in any danger Margaret does get a bit stressed in such conditions and I doubt either of us got a good night's sleep. By the time we got up the wind had moderated a bit but we experienced heavy rain showers all morning. By lunch time the sun actually came out but we had learnt not to trust this unless there was a completely blue sky which we have not experienced since leaving Durham. Anyway we were getting a bit stir crazy so we decided to drive out to John O'Groats. On the way we stopped at Gills Bay where the larger ferries to the Orkneys leave from. There seems to be a lot of work going on in the area of the Dock. When we got to John O'Groats I have to say it was a bit of a disappointment. OK some effort has been made to create a nice parking area with some commercial premises but given its fame I thought it would have been a bit more upmarket. Even the passenger ferry in the harbour looked scruffy! The lady in the Information Bureau showed us how to get to Duncansby Head and that was where we headed next. Again a single track road leading to a small car park. There were some nice views of the Island of Stromo and you could see the southern Orkneys. If you climb up the hill going away from the car park you get a good view of the Duncansby Stacks which are large columns of rocks rising from the sea near to the cliffs. We had considered a day trip to the Orkneys but given the weather and the cost we decided against it. With the car it was over £100 for a day return, I can go to France for much less. Also the ferry times were not convenient for us. On the way back we stopped at the Castle of Mey which belonged to the Queen Mother for many, many years since she purchased it in 1952 she spent time there every summer until she died. It is now owned by the Queen Elizabeth Castle of Mey Trust and is open to visitors and there is also a shop and café where we had a very nice cream tea. We did not bother with the house as it was quite near to closing time. It certainly has a nice spot overlooking the sea and is quite private and I can understand why the Queen Mum enjoyed being there.

All the sites we are using on this trip were booked some time ago and having booked in advance does take away any flexibility. However we decided that we would leave here a day earlier as the original journey to our next site was quite long and we have decided that we will stop off at Dalchalm for three days which also meant cutting down on the time we would spend at Morvich. Reception was very helpful in giving me a refund for one night which also took that night off the Caravan Club system. I was then able to amend our stay at Morvich and then book Dalchalm. All this on a dongle connection with a speed reminiscent of the old dial up internet days. Somehow we managed it which is more than can be said for trying to view one of our bank accounts online. After dinner I wandered down to the beach in an attempt to capture some dramatic setting sun and cloud shots on my camera.

Thursday and our last full day at Dunnet Bay. Although we awoke to rain the day turned out to be the best we have had so far at the site. It was still very windy but we had sunshine for most of the day although that does not mean that it can't rain and have sunshine at the same time, such are the differences in weather patterns in this part of the world!

For us we were out by 10.00am which is pretty good for us! We have decided to visit Wick and took the route back to John O'Groats and then down the A99 which follows the coast all the way down to Wick. It was strange in that despite being very windy the sea did not appear rough. From the A99 there are some lovely views out over the coast. You can't help noticing the number of deserted, what I imagine to be crofts, dotted throughout the landscape. They look pretty substantial as far as the thickness of the walls but the weak point seems to be the roofs. Whilst some have been repaired many lay in ruins. One would have thought they may have made bijou holiday homes but perhaps they need too much work and of course they would have no services. About half way between John

O'Groats and Wick we came across the village of Keiss and followed the narrow road to the harbour. It's surprising how small some of these harbours are especially the entrances. When we arrived in Wick we drove around to see what was what and eventually came back to the riverside car park. We looked around the town centre which had obviously had some money spent on it and it was regaled with flowers. The large buildings were mainly banks and a large pub/restaurant called the Alexander Bain, the original Mr Bain apparently invented the first electric clock. On our way out of town we stopped for some shopping at what seemed a fairly new Tesco and I don't think I have ever come of a supermarket to behold such wonderful views over the surrounding countryside. Having filled up with fuel we made our way back across country to the campsite.

After lunch we drove back out to Dunnet Head as the weather was so bright. The spray was coming up over the cliffs! When we walked up to the viewpoint the wind was really strong. It was nice to revisit with the sun shining. When we got back to the site we went for a walk along the beach which is really lovely and it reminded me a bit of the beach at Bidart near Biarritz. The campsite can hardly be seen from the beach but the views the other way are magnificent.

Friday and we are moved a little further south to the Caravan Club site called Dalchalm at Brora. Whilst fortunately the wind had died down the rain had returned which made for a miserable journey. We arrived at Dalchalm a few minutes after midday and already there were two units in front of us! The approach to the site from the main road is very narrow with a scary bridge! We were able to bag one of the few remaining hardstandings. After lunch we drove into Brora to have a look round and to top up with fuel although it was 8p more per litre than we paid yesterday! Back at the site we walked out to the beach. To facilitate this you have to cross a golf course so we had to keep an eye out for golfers as I did not fancy my body getting in the way of a golf ball. There has been little let up in the rain all day, although not heavy it is that misty type rain. I did manage a bit of a walk in the evening but the rain was never far away. Interestingly the Caravan Club campsite is virtually full this evening but the commercial site next door has three units on, one of them being a tent. The facilities don't look anywhere near as good but the difference in popularity is very marked.

Saturday and the miserable weather continues as it rained most of the day only brightening up in the evening. Just as well we had the Grand Prix qualifying to watch! Vettel on pole (again) for Red Bull. Afterwards we did show willing and drove into Brora to have a look round although despite being a Saturday some of the shops were closed. There is a useful Co-operative supermarket.

The weather continues to be the main topic of conversation as, deep joy, we are promised the remnants of Hurricane Katia is heading in our direction and due to be with us on the day we plan to leave our current site on Monday. Obviously no decision can be made yet as we do not know exactly when or the intensity, although very strong winds gust to 60mph+ are predicted. In fact the weather forecast for the Highlands over the next 7/10 days looks pretty awful and it has crossed our minds that we should just pack up and head for home or at least somewhere that has better weather forecast. We shall see.

Sunday 11th September, not 9/11 as our American chums would have it. But whichever way you say it the events of 10 years ago are still beyond belief. I was still at work when it all happened and was about to train a fellow manager in the art of electronic stock inventory using wireless technology when she told me what had happened, it was about 2.30 in the afternoon UK time.

Today was a pretty lazy day for us as we had a Grand Prix to watch which Sebastian Vettel won ahead of JB and Alonso. Unfortunately Mark Webber had a tussle with Massa which put him out of the race. Still too early to call either driver or constructors championships but increasing looking like Red Bull for the second year running.

The weather has been a bit better today although still many showers around and it has been suspiciously calm given what we have been promised for Monday. Quite a few have taken down awnings. We were in two minds as to what to do. If the time line of the forecast was correct we could have left on Monday morning and got to our next site before the wind got to its highest strength. The only trouble is that we would be heading into the worst of the wind. We therefore decided to stay put for another couple of days and sit out the storm. We are booked to arrive at Bunree on Friday 16th September and had thought about having a couple of extra days there but they were fully booked for the Thursday so we have just cut our visit to Morvich down to a couple of days. We seemed to have chopped and changed so much I won't be surprised if we turn up at a campsite on the wrong day!

Monday, where are you Katia? The morning actually dawned quite bright in so far as it was not raining! Margaret went off to do some washing although her plans for get it dry were thwarted by not only had it started to rain but also lack of coins for the tumble dryer put us right at the back of the queue. The lady warden (relief not regular) was not particularly helpful in the quest for 20p's either as she said she would need to empty the machine but did not offer to do it any time soon.

It seems our Katia is trying to avoid us as the news showed very bad weather conditions in Ayrshire which suggested the worse of the storm would cross the central belt of Scotland rather than further north. A few people left the site today and a few arrived so clearly they were not too bothered by the predicted doom and gloom. My previous changes to our itinerary were made yesterday. Our thinking was to cancel our short stay at Morvich and just add the two days to Bunree but the online booking showed Bunree fully booked for Thursday. Today when I looked they had space so I cancelled Morvich and booked an additional two days at Bunree. When you cancel a booking you have to select a reason from a list none of which really reflected the real one.

Tuesday, we had heavy rain overnight and it was a little windier but certainly not gale force. It did brighten up a bit in the morning but rain was never far away. Having been here for four complete days and done hardly anything we felt we had to do something so we decided to drive out to Dornoch which is about 20 miles away. At a place called Gordonbush which is inland and up in the hills from the campsite they are building a new wind farm. This necessitates the movement of three large lorries to transport one wind turbine to the site. There is a notice in the campsite warning us of possible delays. Yesterday when we went into Brora we were held up a little whilst the convoy turned into an impossibly narrow road. Today the same thing happened but this was the other side of Golspie. Fortunately we were on a straight bit of the A9 which looked as if it had recently been improved, goodness knows what it would have been like in the centre of Golspie or Brora. These convoys do have a police escort and they were getting everyone to move over to the left of the road. No sooner had the convoy arrive it passed us quite quickly and we were on our way.

Dornoch, like Golspie, seems a more substantial town and more prosperous looking than other places we have come across in the north of Scotland. Dornoch has a nice main street and some back streets with shops and cafes. There is a Cathedral somewhere but we seemed to have missed it! Apparently the town was a big church/religious centre in the past. Having a nose up one of the little side street we came upon a house with the most fantastic garden, even had stripes on the lawn. All this rain is good for something!

Dornoch has a rather nice beach and is just a short distance from the town. Where we parked the car there was a fence separating us from the dunes. Rather strangely there were a row of crows sitting on this fence looking directly at the car owners! Rather than head back the way we came we took the single track road towards Embo and then around the shores of Loch Fleet before re-joining the A9. Back in Brora we stopped at the Co-Operative (Good with Food!) for some supplies before our onward move in the morning.

Wednesday 14th September. We made our much delayed departure from Dalchalm today. However the forecast seems to have got it a bit wrong. We awoke to bright sunshine but windy conditions, was this Katia two days late? As it was brighter I took a break from packing up to get some pictures of the beach in reasonable conditions. At home in MK we tend to get either sunshine or rain, rarely is it as changeable as we have found in Scotland. Today proved no different with rain drifting in on a whim with bright sunshine almost in seconds! The first obstacle to overcome was getting out to the main road without meeting another vehicle which we achieved. We also came across another convoy of wind farm equipment, this time the blades and turret, don't think they will be fitting them today! It was very windy and we were being shaken around quite a bit and it was particularly bad as we crossed the bridge over Dornoch Firth. Fortunately the bridge over the Cromarty Firth was not too bad and neither was the Kessock Bridge in Inverness. After this the wind did not seem to be a problem as we were now driving along the Great Glen on the shores of Loch Ness. Our issue now was the relatively narrow and twisty roads although through beautiful countryside. Lots of motorhomes on the road today. We got to the campsite, a little way south of Fort William about 1.30pm. 130 miles on these sorts of roads is like doing double the distance on a motorway so best to allow plenty of time. The final approach to the Bunree site is also very narrow but fortunately controlled by traffic lights which is sensible. For the first time in ages we have been unable to use the satellite as reception seems impossible. I have seen a couple of other dishes but they seem to have a clearer view of the high hill the site backs onto. The caravan aerial is working fine although, of course, we can't get our own regional programmes. The campsite was a wonderful location right on Loch Linnhe and the loch side pitches are much prized although Margaret prefers to be a bit further back in the hope we will be more sheltered.

Thursday and a very rare day, at least, in Scotland. We awoke to a bright blue sky and it was still there when the sun set! In the morning we walked to the Corran Ferry which we caught across to Ardgour. (free for foot passengers) We wandered along the shore one way and then the other towards the Lighthouse. We could see the campsite across the Loch. On the way back to the ferry we stopped for coffee at the Inn at Ardgour and sat outside in the sunshine. Apparently Thomas Telford was responsible for the first main ferry infrastructure. Whilst the sun was hot there was a chill in the air. We re-joined the ferry and watched them load the vehicles from the high up seating, every inch was made use of.

After lunch we decided to have a drive out around Loch Leven with Kinlochleven at the head of the Loch. We were able to stop a few times to take some pictures. At Kinlochleven we made a toilet stop only to find them shut but with a note to use the place called the Ice Factory which was opposite. The Ice factory happens to be an extreme sports complex with climbing walls but most interesting was the ice wall which was behind closed doors but there were viewing windows. It looked fascinating with walls of ice 20 or so feet high with people trying to make their way up the sheer walls of ice. From here we made our way to Glencoe and took the road towards Oban along the shore of Loch Linnhe. We were heading for Portnacroish but it did not seem to exist so we turned down towards Port Appin along a narrow single track road. When we got there it was packed and the narrow road congested so we turned around and made our way back to the campsite.

Friday and unfortunately the weather returned to type today. Although it was not that wet it was grey and dark all day. As a result we had a lazy day only venturing into Fort William for some shopping and to fill the car with fuel. The Morrison's fuel station was certainly busy although hardly surprising as this is the cheapest diesel we have seen since Tesco in Wick! It's also interesting how it keeps the price lower at other fuel stations nearby.

The site here at Bunree is still almost full with only a few free pitches in the evening and several of those are not being used because of the risk of flooding unless an unbooked overnighter turns up

when the warden may let them be used. It amuses me how many men are wandering around in shorts, why? Let's hope they don't get frostbite!

Saturday 17th September. When we awoke the rain was hammering down on the caravan roof and we thought here we go again! However as the morning went on it did start to brighten and we even had a nice rainbow on the other side of the Loch. Not wishing to commit to going too far we decided that the Glencoe Visitor Centre a few miles from the site would be worth seeing. Its run by the National Trust for Scotland, rather like the Culloden Battlefield. It tells the story of the Glencoe Massacre when the MacDonald's were slaughtered by the Campbell's. This was not any inter Clan rivalry but done on the instructions of King William of Orange although he signed the order it seemed he may not have known much about the detail but it was done in his name. Obviously this story is part of folklore but I had not realised the actual number slain was relatively small and is put at around 35. However many more were thought to have died as a result of freezing conditions when they fled the scene. So the tangled web of history of the English, Scottish, Clans and Jacobite's are all here. In addition to the history of the Glencoe Massacre there is also an interesting representation of how Scotland and the UK were formed over millions of years. At one point Scotland was south of the Equator! Wonder if they had better weather then! Right next the Visitor Centre is a Camping and Caravan Club site which looked nice.

After some lunch at the Centre and with the weather holding well we decided to take a ride up through Glencoe to Rannoch Moor, that massive desolate area of boggy countryside that covers such a large area. We stopped several times to take photos. I have been in many mountain areas in Europe but Scotland holds its own in impressiveness. On the way back to Glencoe we stopped at a waterfall which was in full spate, the rain does have some uses! Margaret wanted to see Glencoe village but there is not a lot to see. It's a story that is repeated right across the highlands with places with famous names being rather nondescript but the surrounding countryside being amazing.

Sunday. Today has not been too bad weather wise and a little warmer. After lunch we drove back to Fort William and looked for the Caledonian Canal. We turned off the A830 at Banavie onto the B8004 and found a car park right by the canal and Neptune's Staircase as the flight of locks here is called. Staircase locks, for those that don't know, is where one lock immediately leads into the next with no stretch of canal in between. Certainly a major engineering project and of course the engineer that seems to have built half of Scotland was in charge, Thomas Telford. This set of locks, 8 in total, raise the canal 64 feet. Having walked up the flight and taken some photos we head out on the B8004 as it follows the canal although for most of its route it's too far from the road to get a good view although later you do cross the canal near a couple of locks.

From the canal we headed out towards Spean Bridge but on the way stopped at the Commando Memorial on the A82 which we had seen when we passed with the van some days before. It is there to commemorate the setting up of the Commando's but has since been used to remember other soldiers including those killed recently in Afghanistan. Encouraging that individual memorials left my family members remain intact. Next to the site they are building what looks like a further memorial. I was surprisingly busy at the memorial even coaches stopped and clearly many of the passengers were visitors from overseas. Margaret wanted to stop at the visitors centre in Spean Bridge which we did. At least they had toilets. I even tasted whisky which is not something I have ever drunk. I am in no position to judge its quality but it tasted a bit like brandy but sharper!

Monday. The weather has taken a turn for the worse today with rain most of the morning. We were watching an old B&W film starring Dirk Bogarde called the Victim. There were signs of brightness but we finished watching the film before going out for the afternoon so it was a bit later than usual. We decided to drive down to Oban stopping en route Portnacroish where there is a shop/café which has a view point overlooking Stalker Castle. Back on the road and interesting to see they are building

cycle tracks alongside the main road. We have noticed a lot of cyclists on the roads in Scotland and having these tracks on what are mainly narrow roads is an excellent idea and will certainly encourage more people to cycle if they can do it in safety. On our way to Oban we passed the Caravan Club site at North Ledaig. Oban is a busy place being a major port for ferries to the Islands. It also seems to have a good selection of shops and eateries. Unfortunately during our visit the weather did close in a bit so we took refuge in a café for tea and scones. On the way back there was surprisingly little traffic.

Tuesday 20th September and our last full day here at Bunree. Weather, as usual, very changeable. Had a pretty lazy day but in mid-afternoon set off for Fort William. Whilst we have been through the town several times and stopped at the supermarket and to fill up with fuel we have never looked around the town. I can see why the nicer hotels are a bit out from the centre. Whilst it has some nice outdoor shops and, as Margaret discovered, a shop selling well known and expensive ladies fashions there was not much to write home about. We treated ourselves to an early dinner before tackling the supermarket. Funny how you can't think about food shopping when you are full!! Every time I try and fill up at the Morrison's fuel station there are queues, no doubt because it's the cheapest for miles around. A favourite place for motorhomes.

The weather forecast for tomorrow is not good with heavy rain and strong winds supposedly coming our way. Don't think we can delay our departure so will have to bite the bullet regardless unless it is really bad. From the day we arrived at Bunree a week ago the site has been virtually full. Regardless of the weather forecast people want to be on the front row overlooking the Loch!

Wednesday and time to leave Bunree. True to its word the forecast was correct with wind and driving rain. I think Margaret could have been persuaded to stay another day! Fortunately we were not the only ones who were departing today so I think she was at least encouraged by that. We pulled out of the site and made our way towards Glencoe. Once past the Visitors Centre you start to climb up through the Pass. There was a motorhome and a car and caravan ahead of us. Whilst I appreciate that the conditions were truly awful they were making exceptionally slow progress. One by one they pulled into laybys and let following vehicles pass. On the way up the Pass we could see the excess water cascading down the rock faces. The waterfall that we had visited a few days before was really in full spate and had we stood where we did before we would have got soaked. We would have got soaked just getting out the car anyway! Even the few good sections of road here are not that wide which does make for difficult towing and I can understand why the previous units had been going slow. At the top of the Pass you start to cross Rannoch Moor and this part of the route is very exposed and the rain exceptionally heavy. When you passed a lorry going in the other direction you could, momentarily, not see a thing because you were engulfed in a wall of water. The rain stayed with us for the rest of the journey and I even got wet just booking in at our next campsite, Blair Drummond.

We selected one of the pitches that was on chipped stone rather than the type with the blocked base which grass grows through as we thought it would be cleaner. I got absolutely soaked getting the basics done. After some lunch the rain had eased and I decided to try and set up the satellite and had great difficulty getting a picture. Eventually I found a spot to the side of the van but on the grass. Fortunately the warden was fine about me putting the tripod on the grass. Although we have some channels we don't have all and rather surprisingly we have lost BBC News 24 which is often the one we usually get with no problem. (I later learnt that in their wisdom the BBC had change the transponder that sends out the signal for their News channel) The sun did come out and for a while we had a lovely blue sky but unfortunately it did not last.

Thursday and although we have had a few showers it's been a much brighter today. After the horrendous day yesterday we did not go out until after lunch. We drove to Doune to have a look

round but road works prevented us getting to the Castle. It looked a nice little town. From here we drove onto Callander which is Rob Roy country. We have been here before but many years ago and I was convinced there was a statue to him outside the Visitor Centre but not today. I even asked in the Centre but was told there was one in Stirling but not in Callander. Perhaps I was mistaken! The town is strung out along the A84. One thing you always notice about towns in Scotland near to well known tourist areas is dozens of B&B's. Many of the buildings are quite substantial and I love the rose coloured stone they use. On the way back we used a different route via Thornhill and at one point we had a spectacular view over the surrounding countryside. Back at the campsite, which is not full like Bunree there is a daily turnover of units although it's quite difficult to distinguish between tourist and seasonal units.

Friday 23rd September. Despite the rain we decided to go ahead with our trip to Stirling Castle. We used the Park and Ride near junction 10 on the M9. It was only £1.20 each and the bus dropped us right outside the Castle, so cheaper than parking in the Castle car park. I had to admire the lady bus driver for getting the bus round some really narrow streets!

The Castle dominates the northern approach to Stirling and impressive it is to. Given that Scotland is known to have the odd shower it was surprising that the ticket office was open to the elements! As a fortification it is difficult to imagine how any assault could be successful but it seems that siege could be. The Castle has been used as a Royal residence for many hundreds of years but it was James V that built the Palace in the Castle grounds. It has recently been restored to its former glory. There is so much to see. In one exhibition they trace the kings and Queens of Scotland back through history and there was even a King David although I don't think I am a relation. Obviously the theme of the Old Firm Derby resonates as is the case almost everywhere in Scotland. Mind you there seemed to be enough skulduggery amongst the Scottish royalty without the help of the English! Also included within the Castle is the Regimental Museum of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, who have since been incorporated into the Royal Regiment of Scotland. The exhibition has displays of uniforms and equipment over the years and records the impressive number of Victoria Cross's bestowed on soldiers of the regiment over the years. The list of battles seems endless from America and Canada to the Crimea, the Indian Mutiny and of course more recent campaigns. The Museum apparently does not gain any income from the general Castle admission fee so depend on contributions and profits from sales in the museum shop. Back to the Castle and even the café has a vaulted ceiling. The last thing we looked at was the Tapestry Studio where they have been recreating some of the tapestries that once adorned the Palace. It all seems very complicated but none the less magnificent. You can of course walk part way around the walls which have amazing views over the surrounding countryside and in one direction a good view of the Wallace Monument. After near 4 hours at the Castle we caught the bus back to the Park and Ride. On the return journey the bus went through the main shopping area which looked very nice.

Saturday. We went back into Stirling today for some shopping and to fill up with fuel. En route we stopped to take some photos of the Castle from a distance. The road works of the day before had been cleared away which made access to Sainsbury's a little easier. This is a supermarket group we have not used a lot and I think today's visit did nothing to encourage us to go again. They seemed to be in the process of adding an extension to the building which might have explained why the selection available seemed limited.

Back at the van we watched the qualifying for the Singapore Grand Prix and Vettel was on pole again with Mark Webber in second place. Sebastian is in sight of scoring his second World Championship but anything can happen in the race! In a way it was a shame we had the qualifying as the weather has been rather nice today and warmer than of late. A sure sign we are heading south!

Sunday. A rather lazy day as it was the Singapore Grand Prix, which Vettel won with Jenson Button second and Mark Webber third. Vettel is now only one point away from his second world championship. Earlier today the sun was out but during the late afternoon rain came. Tomorrow we move further south to Melrose in the borders.

Monday 26th September. It was unusual to set off to our next campsite in bright sunshine. It was also unusual to be driving on motorways after several weeks as we made our way down the M9/M8 to the Edinburgh bypass where the traffic was somewhat busier. We then set out across country on the A68 which seems to have had some improvements since we last used the road many years ago. When we got to Melrose the Caravan Club instructions are that you don't turn into the town but carry on to the end of the bypass and enter the town from the opposite end. (when you walk round the town you can understand why) I don't know about anyone else but the day we leave a site we have a routine which means that we get on with things and are often ready to leave by between 9 and 10am. The trouble is that when you are moving sites and only travelling 70/80 miles you risk arriving at the next site too early, or at least by the midday deadline. The problem with this rule of course is that everyone turns up at the same time and if the departure by midday is not enforced you get chaos! So when we pulled off the main road there was already a queue of units waiting to book in. As it happened we were soon booked in and found a pitch.

After lunch we were about to walk into the very pleasant little town of Melrose. However I was hijacked by a lovely lady called Irene who needed help with her television, how could I refuse. Whilst I managed to get all the UK programmes I was unable to get rid of the change of language that she had managed to change the TV to! I did hear the warden managed to get to the right point later in the afternoon. In Melrose we visited the Priorwood Gardens which is run by the National Trust of Scotland so we had the advantage of free entry. Next door is Melrose Abbey, well at least the ruins on the Abbey. It was interesting that some of the shops and restaurants appeared to be quite upmarket which is a welcome change from wall to wall charity shops.

Tuesday. Whilst the southern part of the country was basking in higher temperatures here in southern Scotland the weather remained dull although not particularly cold. I wanted to top up with fuel and we needed a few bits so decided to have a drive out to Selkirk. We did not stop as we were not really sure where the centre was as it was not signed although it could have just been the main road through. From here we went onto Galashiels which I don't know much about but it seems to be quite a substantial place with lots of new shopping and we found the cheapest fuel we have seen since leaving MK at the new ASDA. Back at the site it is completely full so even the weather does not put the hardy souls off!

Wednesday 28th September. We left Melrose in lovely sunshine which stayed with us all day and got warmer and warmer. We took the A68 down to the A69 at Corbridge. The A68 is an amazing road with marvellous views out across the Northumberland countryside. It actually made us want to come back this way and explore a bit more. It was quite a shock to stop in a layby and to get out into warm air! From Corbridge the route took us out to the A1 near Newcastle upon Tyne and then south. From Scotch Corner south they are converting the A1 into another section of A1(M) and as a result TomTom got a bit confused because the junction he was going to exit the A1 was no longer there! Fortunately the one on the A61 was. When we got to Thirsk Racecourse Reception was closed, but the instructions were to find a pitch and go back later to pay. For the last month we have carried around two picnic chairs which until today we had not used. It seemed strange to be sitting in hot sunshine at the end of September.

Thursday. Even hotter today, could have been in southern France. After breakfast I took the car over to the Tesco fuel station which is almost opposite the campsite. I felt like a fraud only taking the car on such a small journey! Later we walked into the delightful Market Town of Thirsk which was

immortalised in All Creatures Great and Small the TV series based on the James Herriot books. What a busy place and it was not even Market Day. It also had an excellent range of local shops and finding somewhere to eat would not be difficult. We walked up to the church which is very impressive. There is a Museum dedicated to Alf Wright's creation James Herriot although apart from looking around the shop we did not go round the museum. We had some lunch in the town and then walked back to the site to spend a lazy afternoon enjoying the unseasonably good weather. Like nearly all the sites we have been on in the last six weeks Thirsk Racecourse site is full. Perhaps I understand now why the Club don't lower their fees much in September.

Friday 30th September and we are heading home, back to Milton Keynes. It was a long journey, for us, of 177 miles. Traffic fortunately kept moving and volumes were not too bad except for the section south from where the M6 filters into the M1. It was strange stopping at service stations and finding summer like temperatures. We got home about 1.30pm with clear access to the back garden. As is Margaret's wish the washing machine appeared to be on in minutes after unlocking the back door, happy holidays!