

Culcreuch Castle Reflections

Elizabeth Galbraith DeCarolis, CGS #681

Our First Visit in 2001

In 2001, my husband Laurence (Larry) and I signed up early for an Elderhostel entitled “Cathedral Cities of England and France” studying the medieval structures, their features and historical significance. As we put together our plans, we decided to include Scotland so we could visit Edinburgh and Stirling, adding one more stopover in Fintry at Culcreuch Castle for my 69th birthday in May.

Our departure from Raleigh-Durham was not quite normal. After all passengers had been seated for the flight to London and all was ready for take-off, our flight had already taxied to the runway where a fuel line leak was discovered in the aircraft. We returned to the terminal and spent the night near RDU airport. The next morning, events began to deteriorate further: we missed our London connection to Edinburgh and were late for picking up our rental car and getting used to driving on the left side of the road. While remaining in Edinburgh for the first two nights, all our fatigue melted after dinner when we sat down in the BnB living room with a cup of hot tea, in front of a blazing fire in the fireplace. There we met a new friend also warming his woolen body; we named him Laird Pooh.



Laird Pooh

After two days in Edinburgh, on day 3 - which was May 1st - Larry and I were anxious to head west into Central Scotland, with more sight-seeing *enroute*. The drive to Culcreuch was only about 1-plus hours, so we stopped at Stirling Castle, then Loch Lomond and Inch Galbraith in the center of the attached photo. Loch Lomond was quiet that day, no boating in action, so we were unable to go any closer to Inch Galbraith. Now, when studying close-up photos, there are clearly the remains of an earlier defensive tower, now mostly crumbled into a great heap of stones. Historical records indicate that the Galbraith first chief (Gilchrist Bretnach) and family members had lived there.



Loch Lomond with Inch Galbraith in center

As we drove through the countryside, we were stunned to see snow on the surrounding mountains. We had brought clothing for May in North Carolina, and were unprepared for the sharp, chilly wind of Central Scotland! We also met our first Highland cattle specimen. He was a splendid animal!



**Our first meeting with a Highland Bull.
He likely weighs about 1,500 to 2,000 pounds!**

Arriving at Culcreuch Castle, we were happy to finally stop driving and went for a walk, finding a bench near the loch and a small tree which my sister Carolyn Galbraith Nolan had gifted earlier to the ancestral home. Laird Laurence DeCarolis looks as if he has lived at Culcreuch for years.



“Laird” Laurence DeCarolis

Before dinner we climbed the marble staircase to the top floor and the Laird’s Suite, the room with the most beautiful view of the sheep pasture, the loch, and across the River Endrick to the Fintry Hills dotted with pre-historic remains of earlier civilizations. What we didn’t know then were two essential facts: we didn’t realize that the hills and mountains were all volcanic in origin, and that this region of Scotland sat almost directly over the Great Glen Fault of the Atlantic plate and the European plate boundary. We also didn’t know about the ancient Standing Stones or the Stone Circles, much like those at Stonehenge. What we did understand were the 21st-century comforts of Culcreuch Hotel with its canopied bedstead, marble tub and the view from the windows. The first Galbraiths who lived here had chosen an ideal location with a view of the sheep pasture, a small man-made loch (lake), the Endrick Waterway and the Campsie Fells (hills or low mountains) beyond. The family women must have loved the site. Men thought more about security from invaders.



Canopied bedstead



View from the front lawn at Culcreuch

The morning of my birthday on May 2nd, I returned from breakfast to find that the dressing table had been filled with spring flowers by the attentive staff at the castle.



Flowers for my birthday!

That evening of May 2nd, my 69th birthday, we had dinner again in the dining room, and the menu was splendid!



Here I am in the Culcreuch Dining Room on my 69th birthday.

We stayed at the castle only two nights this first visit, just long enough to inspire us to return the following year for the Clan Galbraith Gathering when I was scheduled to present the genealogy seminar. After loading our small rental car, we said our good-bys to the gracious Culcreuch staff with promises to return in 2002.

After the two days in Edinburgh, our visit to Culcreuch had gone mostly as planned and we were ahead of schedule. Now leaving Culcreuch, we were on our way to Stirling, then to the Edinburgh train station to continue on to York and the Elderhostel. The roads toward Stirling were often lined with sharp curbs cut from natural stone. On approaching the town of Fintry, in a rush to reach Edinburgh in time for the train to York, we didn't calculate on knife-edged stones along the side-walks and blew the left-front tire – **completely**. With no telephone booth in sight, and in an era without cell-phones to call AAA, we kept clacking along into Stirling where Unknown Trip Planners were keeping watch, guiding us a short half-mile straight to the SMS Tyre & Exhaust Centre with no map. The Centre was located on Back 'O' Hill Road. After about 30 minutes, and 37.35 £s poorer, we were on our way again, turning in the rental car with its brand new tire at the Airport Car Rental office. Now carrying all our luggage, we took a city

bus to the train station where we caught the train to York, then at York dragged/carried our luggage with us as we ran to the Hotel York, barely in time for dinner with the other Elderhostelers. Exhilarating day! That was our first visit to Culcreuch Castle.

Clan Galbraith Gathering at Culcreuch, 2002

We **did** return to Culcreuch the following year for the 2002 Clan Galbraith Gathering, and on this trip left the driving to Mr. Gordon Scott of the Countryside Taxi & Minibus Service. He met us at the Glasgow airport, drove us via a scenic route and arrived at Culcreuch with time to relax. Riding with Mr. Scott was a wise decision.

The ten castle guestrooms had long been booked by Clan Galbraith members, so we were directed to our reserved room in the former stables, a row of several converted stable-to-bedroom accommodations with their own private baths. These rooms were comfortable, although small, and were just a few steps from the meeting rooms used by the castle owners for groups who came for weddings, anniversaries, birthdays, clan gatherings or multi-day meetings. Our days were filled with social gatherings, lectures and coach tours of the sites, providing visual detail to the history of Clan Galbraith over time.

The Clan gathering in 2002 covered five days and evenings, from the Opening Ceremony on Sunday, May 19th until the Closing Ceremony on Thursday, May 23rd. The Gathering treated us to numerous coach tours in the vicinity of Culcreuch: to the ancient site of Dumbarton Castle, Craigmaddie Castle, the village of Kippen on the road to the Castle, Loch Lomond, a tour of Stirling with a Scottish whiskey tasting, seminars and Pub Night at Culcreuch, with delicious meals every day and evening. Clan Piper, James Austin of Ontario, Canada would play Reveille at 7:00 A.M. every day, pipe us to breakfast, then to meetings and lunch. On the final day of the gathering, he led us to the Closing Dinner in his magnificent regalia. We concluded the final day with a special dinner and Highland dancing. There was much pomp, ceremony and toasting to the current and next gathering, with everyone in his or her best Galbraith kilt, sash, vest or scarf. At the close of each day, James Austin would pipe us to our quarters with a Scottish version of Taps. Truly memorable.

Each day, it was always good to come “home” to Culcreuch, anticipating a hot dinner followed by a climb to the rooms on the upper floors or to the stable rooms in the meeting hall across the driveway. We have now stayed in both locations.



Larry atop Craigmaddie Castle



Culcreuch: marble spiral staircase



Clan Piper, James Austin of Ontario, Canada

I had been excited about the visit to Loch Lomond, but the Gathering's first sightseeing day was overcast, with a frigid wind and spitting rain. We did get a good view of Inch Galbraith from the viewing spot in the village of Loch Lomond. There are still remnants of an earlier Galbraith castle on the island. In its isolated and difficult location, it's easy to understand that the Galbraiths there could feel some measure of safety from invasion; but on the day we were there, not even the village fishermen were out on the water. Our day, however, was made stellar by a bowl of hot soup and homemade bread at one of the small cafés in Loch Lomond.

In Kippen we visited the remains of the very old village church (its bronze bell carries a date of 1618, but an earlier history references its predecessor church structure in 1238 A.D.) where the Galbraith Crest is an integral sculpture on the one remaining wall. All the other walls have fallen in. It's that crest which, at its top, bears the Galbraith slogan "AB OBICE SAEVIOR" pictured here: "Stronger when opposed."



Kippen Olde Kirk: *Ab Obice Saevior* at the top



Remains of the Kippen Olde Kirk

On our visit to Stirling, we made a stop at the memorial honoring Sir William Wallace for his victory over the English in the Battle of Stirling Bridge in 1297 A.D. At the top of the 220-foot-tall tower, we met a class of school children with shining faces, windswept hair and lots of polite giggling. They asked us many questions! Notice the approaching rain shower heading our direction.



School children on a history fieldtrip inside the Crown of the Sir William Wallace Memorial Tower

On the final day of the Gathering, there was an Association business meeting and preparations to depart. There was also a celebratory dinner ceremony with photographs, speeches, members' original poems read, and best of all, the arrival of the Haggis, a traditional Scottish savory meat-and-rice pudding. The haggis arrived in a stately procession, with bagpipe accompaniment. A spoken greeting was announced, then a poem welcoming the haggis, and finally the blessing of the haggis! Cups were raised again – and again. Then we all were served our haggis, probably with some potatoes which I no longer can recall. Best of all was the company of new friends we had met over the 5 days. It was an event I have not forgotten and still enjoy in my 92-year-old memory!



Farewells: Larry with Mr. Gordon Scott, our cab-driver and Joyce Carey, Culcreuch Office-Manager



Closing ceremony: Procession of the haggis



Addressing the haggis



Larry and Betsy DeCarolis at closing ceremony and banquet

The early history of Clan Galbraith and Culcreuch Castle can briefly be described as follows, over a chronological period of some 550 years:

- 870 A.D.: Dumbarton near Glasgow (pre-Roman origins) was the capital of Strathclyde until its siege and defeat by Vikings in 870 AD. Some survivors emigrated to the Scottish island of Gigha. (Pronounced *ghee-uh*.)
- 12th century: Inch Galbraith in Loch Lomond was built on a crannog, an artificial island in the lake. Near the end of the 12th century, Inch Galbraith was occupied by Galbraith First Chief Gilchrist Bretnach who lived there with his family. Inch Galbraith was built for both defensive and safety purposes after the defeat at Dumbarton.
- Culcreuch Tower was built in 1296 A.D. by Maurice Galbraith, based on 13th c. records. One record indicates that he lived at Culcreuch Castle in 1320.
- Also from the 13th century, the ruins of Craigmaddie Castle in Milngavie dated from 1240 A.D. and was the home of Sir William Galbraith of Baldernock, the 4th Galbraith Chief.
- In 1425 the Galbraiths again tried to re-take Dumbarton, were again defeated and Chief James of Gilcreuch led some 600 survivors to join those already on the Island of Gigha off the west coast of Scotland - earlier occupied by Galbraiths defeated at the battle of Dumbarton in 870 A.D. (Galbraiths on Gigha were known for their fine playing of the *clarsech*, a small Irish harp. Were the Gigha Galbraiths a gentler, kinder group, preferring to make music instead of war? The spelling of *clarsech* is courtesy of the Harvard Dictionary of Music, 18th printing, 1967).