

On Your Way Up

...Some ideas if you are travelling north from Inverness

At the **Cromarty Firth** there is parking places or a bit further on a good café where you can park and view the firth. During the summer you frequently see seals basking on the rocks. Also this is a good viewpoint for birds.

At **Evanton** turn left off onto the **B9176/A836**. This road is wonderful, so picturesque and much nicer than the faster A9. Follow this all the way to **Bonar Bridge** and turn left up to the **Falls of Shin**. In late summer you will see the salmon leap. There are several very nice walks in this area.

I would go back to Bonar Bridge and return to the A9. A short detour round **Dornoch** is interesting as there is another very good site to view seals there.

At **Golspie**, for those who like a walk there is the "Big Burn" walk (park near the Sutherland Arms) or for a bit of history **Dunrobin Castle** and gardens.

The **Timespan Museum** in Helmsdale is very good or there is a nice walk up the river or down round the harbour. Alternatively just past Dunbeath the **Laidhay** croft museum and café is very interesting.

Orkney Highlights

...Our friendly neighbour

The tip of the Old Man of Hoy on the outline of the islands is our constant companion. Rivalry, politics, intrigue, marriage all have played a part in the relationship between Caithness and Orkney from the 9th century and probably before. Norse influence is clear in both communities. Although there are many similarities Orkney is distinctly different with a markedly different accent.

There are 3 ferries over to Orkney. Scrabster or Gills with a car, or John O'Groats for the organised day trip to Orkney. If you have no transport the Scrabster ferry is the most easily accessed by public transport. Also you get a great view of the Old Man of Hoy from the boat.

I have done the John O'Groats' day trip many times and have always thoroughly enjoyed it. The boat trip itself is thrilling. If you keep a look out you may see seals, porpoises or if you are as lucky as some of our visitors have been you may be accompanied by a pod of humpback whales.

The organised day trips take you to all the main places of interest but by no means all. You need more than a day to do Orkney full justice. During the summer months these trips are very popular so it is worthwhile booking in advance.

PENTLAND LODGE HOUSE

...a warm welcome

Dear Guest,

Thank you for choosing to visit us in the North of Scotland.

Our landscape is spectacular; unique peatlands in the heart of the county, rugged cliffs, beautiful beaches and the distant horizons of wide open spaces. The fresh air itself is worth the visit.

If you are planning a stay with us then to fit everything in can be difficult if you don't know the area. Therefore I have put together my favourite day trips around the North with some personal comments that you may find useful when you are planning your days.

All of these tours can be fitted into a day, are circular avoiding repeat road journeys, take you to places to eat at about the right time and have regular stops at interesting places. The "off the main road" routes are essential to get the best from the scenery and most have breath-taking, panoramic views.

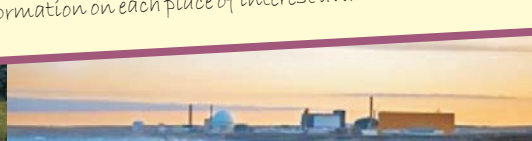
These tours are my personal highlights and of course reflect my interests in wildlife, the environment and history. I hope you find them useful.

Again thank you for visiting my home county, I hope that you have a fantastic holiday. Haste ye back.

Best wishes,

Liz

p.s. Have a look on our community website www.caithness.org for further information, or some fantastic photographs of the scenery you can see at www.pentlandtours.co.uk. Most hotels or tourist information points have detailed information on each place of interest available



Ancient Times

Visiting : Halkirk, Achnarras Quarry, Achavanich Stones, Lybster, Camster Cairns, Watten

Travel along the course of the Thurso river via Halkirk towards the heart of the county and the famous "Flow Country".

Notice the flagstone fences and drystone dykes that mark the fields of the farms. Sadly many of these fences are being replaced by less labour intensive but less attractive alternatives.

Halkirk ❶ is said to be the first "planned" village. There is a river walk from the bridge towards Gerston or back towards Thurso to Braal castle. Easy walking and quite picturesque (about 2 miles).

It takes about 20 minutes to walk up to **Achnarras Quarry** ❷. Look closer at the piles of rocks. If the surface is orange then this was once the sandy bed of the vast lake Orcadia - you may see the ripple marks left by an ancient tide. The rocks are easily split and in the dark layers you may find a fossil. You can see most of the county from this spot.

Caithness is peppered with relics of the stone age, standing stones, cairns, round houses etc and most are unmarked. The **Achavanich Stones** ❸ are very clear, close to the road and have an information plaque.

The road to **Lybster** ❹ takes you through some of the forestry introduced in the 1960's and 70's and now being harvested. Many environmentalists feel that this was an alien introduction which should be reversed.

Lybster harbour is typical of the area. Originally busy with the herring fishing industry but now mainly crab and lobster. The Waterlines café has a very interesting museum and does excellent crab baps.

Towards Wick there is the Hill o' Many Stanes, or get cardiovascular at Whaligoe steps, allegedly 365, down to an old fishing harbour. If you like to walk, a good but long detour to Yarrow is worthwhile.

Camster Cairns ❺ is the best example of a long horned cairn in Scotland. We are seeing how they buried the dead you must imagine the scene of the living when it was built, trees all around, a settlement close by and a much warmer climate. There are thousands of tons of stones in Camster cairns it must have taken a long time to build.

Along the road towards Watten you can see the old **peat cuttings** ❻. An annual, community event until recent times.

Wick Highlights

Visiting : Wick Harbour, Wick Heritage Museum, Old Pulteney Distillery, Sinclair & Girnigoe Castles

For someone coming from the Thurso side of the county it pains a little to admit that architecturally Wick is the more interesting town. I say Wick but really I mean Pulteneytown the old part of Wick.

Most of the places I mention are all within walking distance of the harbour and generally it is easy to park. Before you park take a drive out to **Old Wick Castle** ❶ and tour around the streets at the back of the harbour.

I would start from the right of **Wick Harbour** ❷ as you look at the sea and work my way back so that I reach the distillery after lunch when they do their tours.

I love the story of the breakwater as it demonstrates the sheer power of the sea and how man does not have dominion over it - even Victorian engineers. Thomas Stevenson built it big and strong with 1225 tonnes of concrete only to see it destroyed one stormy night. Undaunted he built it again but double the size only to see it suffer the same fate. He left. The remnants are still visible.

In the harbour is a schooner - the "**Isabella Fortuna**" ❸, typical of the old herring boats used to bring in the "silver darlings", there is also an old fish market.

There are boat trips from Wick harbour taking you down the coast. Good for viewing wildlife or the sea side view of Whaligoe Steps.

The café on the harbour front is excellent or try to find the shortest street in Britain if you prefer something stronger.

Just up from the harbour is the **Wick Heritage Museum** ❹ full of interesting material particularly relating to the herring industry.

No trip to Scotland is complete without a distillery visit and **Old Pulteney** ❺, our local malt, is well worth the tour (2pm) to get the free sample. They have a lovely honey liqueur which I can personally recommend.

If you like a walk, the riverside walk is very pleasant.

Sinclair and Girnigoe Castles ❻ perched on the edge is a romantic setting. You get a good view of Sinclair Bay over to **Ackergill Tower** ❼. Now there's a tale of dastardly deeds and feuding rivalry. Needless to say it ends up with the kidnapped lady hurling herself off the top and her ghost still haunting the tower.

Go West

Visiting : Crosskirk, Melvich, Strathy Point,
Strathnaver Clearances Museum, Forsinard Bog Walk

No matter how often I do this route it never tires, the scenery is so varied and contrasting. If you like walking this trip should be split over 2 days.

There is a nice walk down at Crosskirk to **St Mary's Chapel** ① at the mouth of the Forss River (a good salmon river) and at **Forss Mill** ② there is a salmon leap.

Personally I like the windmills you pass at **Forss** ③ but I don't like some others. They are surprisingly quiet when you are close. The iconic dome of the **Dounreay** ④ fast breeder reactor is well known. Now being decommissioned it continues to provide much employment. Wind farms and planned use of the Pentland Firth for tidal energy makes Caithness a green energy powerhouse.

The shop in **Melvich** ⑤ has a walking story CD and guide which leads you from Melvich beach. This is a good day trip in itself as the walk can take 1 - 3 hours. I love the clear voices of the locals. Melvich beach is beautiful.

A short detour, especially if you are a lighthouse bagger to **Strathy Point** ⑥ is worth the return walk to the lighthouse (about a mile) with a super view.

Strathnaver Clearances Museum ⑦ at Bettyhill has interesting exhibits especially if you are a Mackay. Don't miss the Farr Stone in the churchyard round the back. The café has tourist information and lovely cakes or the Bettyhill hotel has a magnificent sea view.

Turning down **Strath Naver** ⑧ brings very different scenery, a pleasant river valley where you will meet very few cars and see very little habitation. Pre clearances there would have been many more little settlements here. There are plaques with information at various points.

My favourite bit of the journey is between Strath Naver and **Strath Halladale** ⑨. The sense of wilderness is profound. I always see deer here, sometimes in very large numbers, very close to the road. They can be quite bold and stand very happily for photos.

For those who have ever taken the rail journey to Caithness (slower than road but a brilliant journey in the late summer evening) you pass over the line at **Kinbrace** ⑩ and follow it into **Forsinard** ⑪. Stop here to do the bog walk. This might not sound like fun but it is really interesting. Get a guide from the Bird centre at the station which tells you all about the plants you will see. You will be amazed to see the peatlands you have just travelled through close-up. Fortunately you won't get your feet wet as there are stones laid out on the path.

This is a very long day trip and you will be very tired and hungry afterwards.

From Palace to Plain Folk

Visiting : Duncansby Head, Castle of Mey, Dunnet Head,
Mary Ann's Cottage, Dunnet Bay, Castletown Flagstone Trail

The back road to John O'Groats which runs parallel to the coast gives a much better view of the Pentland Firth, Orkney and Stroma. There are a few places to stop where the panoramic view is especially good, for example the corner just before **Sibmister Farm** ① gives a view back over Thurso to Sutherland and east over Dunnet Bay. Further on stop opposite **Stroma** ② and see the abandoned houses and the notorious Pentland Firth currents swirling around it.

Duncansby Head ③ (the most north easterly point), has a brilliant walk to the stacks. Notice how the ground seems spring-loaded when you walk, that's the peat. Follow the fence to the left and you get up close to the nesting birds. At peak times the noise of the birds is deafening. Puffins burrow so are at the top, shag tend to be seen at the bottom of the cliffs. Look out also for seals and if lucky even dolphins and minke whales.

Personally I would not go on to John O'Groats now (it is covered by the Orkney tour) but there is a great wildlife boat trip which takes you to the sea side of the stacks.

Locals had a great affection for the Queen Mother, many have a story to tell of meeting her. Prince Charles has continued the royal link to the county not only by visiting but with practical help to local businesses. The **Castle of Mey** ④ is unlike any other stately home and is a joy to tour. The food is excellent too.

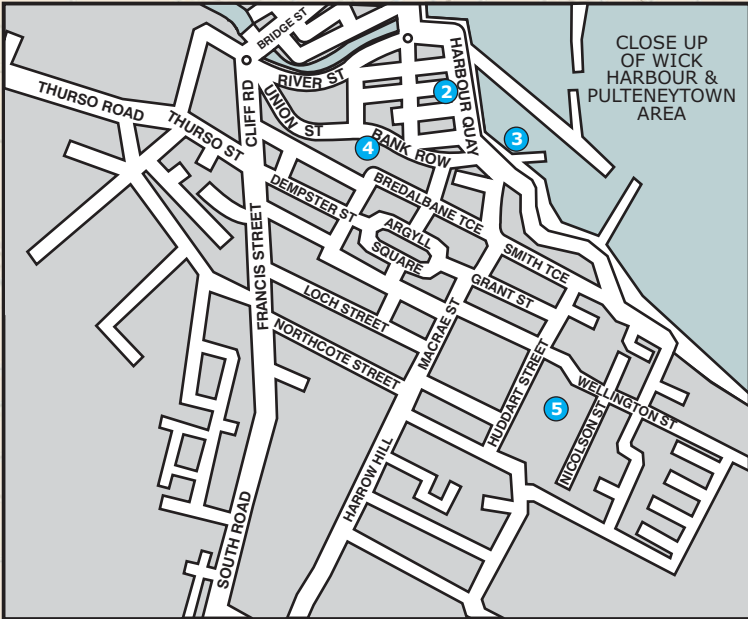
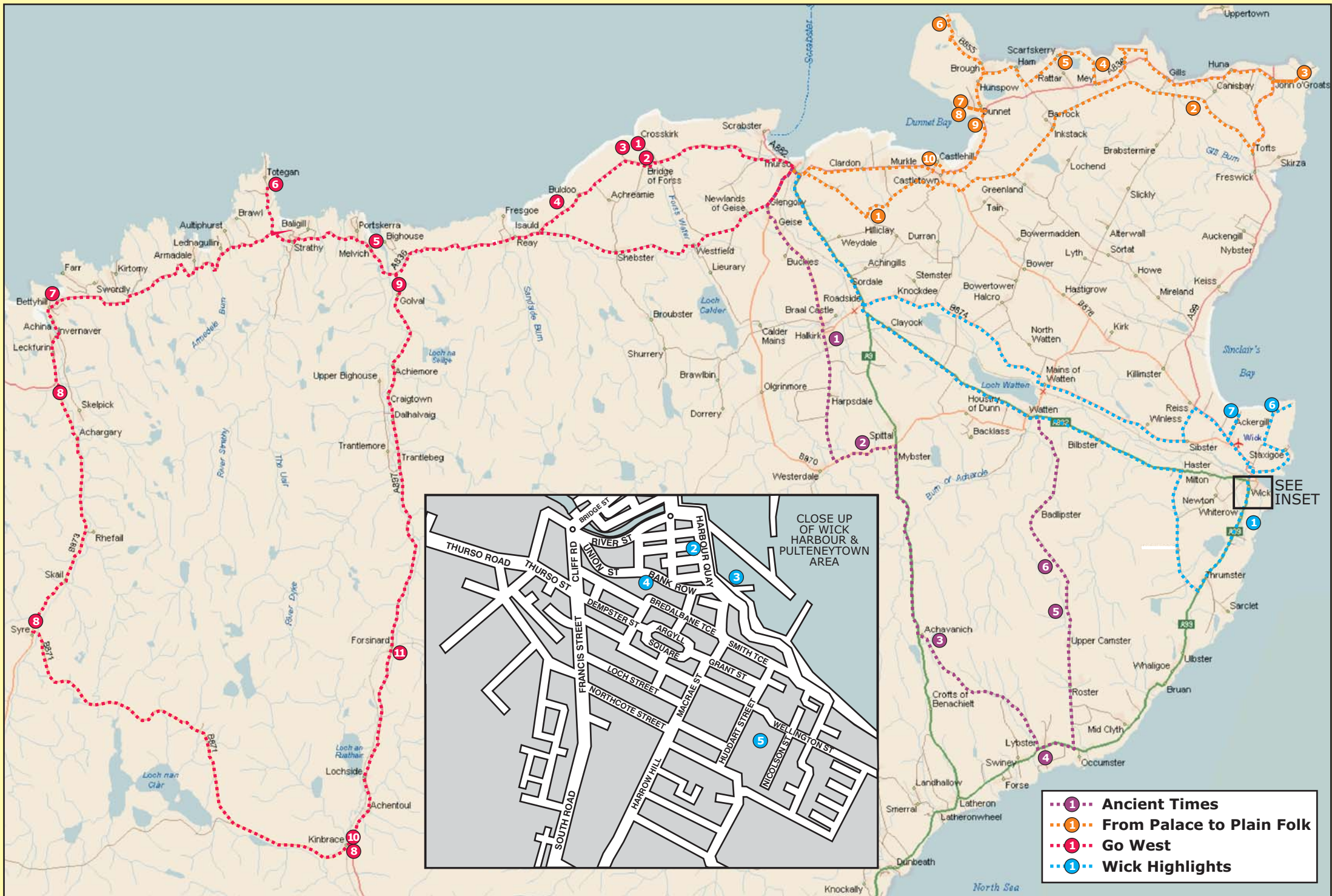
On leaving the castle take the more scenic **Scarfskerry** ⑤ road on to **Dunnet Head** ⑥. The view point, a short walk up past the lighthouse, truly reflects the meaning of the most northerly point. If you are here in the evening the sunsets to the West are stunning. (Of course this is true of almost any point in Caithness.)

Contrast the life of one fine old lady with that of another. **Mary Ann's Cottage** ⑦ is a nostalgic time capsule. You betray your age by the number of items you remember using yourself.

A short walk down to **Dwarwick Harbour** ⑧ gives a grand view over Dunnet Bay.

The **Ranger Service Centre** ⑨ at Dunnet Bay gives good information about local wildlife and the free guided walks available throughout the summer.

The Flagstone Trail in **Castletown** ⑩ is well marked out and takes about 30 minutes. I love walking along the shore looking back over Dunnet Head.



- 1 ● Ancient Times
- 1 ● From Palace to Plain Folk
- 1 ● Go West
- 1 ● Wick Highlights