

2001 A Scotch Odyssey Willie and the Cool Guys

After an uneventful flight on American Airlines our group arrived at Glasgow International Airport and were greeted by Willie Wallace with his homemade sign for the Omaha ScotchWatch. Willie only informed us later that he had spent hours on the sign which explains why he is in the tourism business and not a professional illustrator. We knew we were off to a great start. We loaded into the van and headed for our first stop - Houston Brewery just outside of Glasgow. David the brew master gave us the tour noting that the brewery had just been created in December of 1997. After tasting a wonderful assortment of beers we were off to Oban on the Western Coast of Scotland.

Oban was somewhat of a disappointment. One of the many United Distillers (UDV) facilities we visited we found the visitors center to be lovely and the display and presentation of the history of Oban and the distillation process very informative. They also made a speech about the dangers of photography and barred cameras for use in the distillery. We found this totally inconsistent with previous experience where we were allowed to photograph all aspects of the distillation process. For whatever reason that was the decisions. Another disappointment was the guide knew less than we did about the details of process. Many UDV facilities are really catered to the uninformed tourist. While this serves a useful purpose for marketing scotch whisky to the general public it adds little to obsessive types such as our group.

As with almost every distillery we visited the basic process is almost identical. Maltings are done off site. Oban has water from the Loch _____ and this soft water runs over peat providing the unique flavor infused into the barley. Maltings are done offsite and brought to the distillery for mashing. The Mash Tun is stainless steel and receives 3 infusions of water with the recycling of the 2nd water back into the 3rd infusion. About 14,000 Liters of Liquid is used in the process. Four larchwood washbacks each holding about 36,000 Liters (30,000 Liters of water are used) are used for fermentation which lasts four days.

The wash still holds 18,800 liters while the spirit still holds 8,296. Foreshots run about 15 to 20 minutes, the middle cut is 2 to 2 ½ hours and the feints only run about 20 minutes. The foreshots and feints are fed back into the spirit still and this leads to a middle cut that ranges from 66 to 66 percent alcohol depending upon the stages of the distillation process itself.

Oban runs on average 5 days a week, 24 hours a day. We found this to be typical of almost all the distilleries we visited. The total workforce of 9 men keep the facility running. As with many of the distilleries the tour guides outnumbered the distillery staff.

Most Oban is stored in refill casks that can be used 3 or 4 times. The casks are refill bourbon casks and Oban uses the Speyside Cooperage for most of their casks. About 80 percent is sold for blends and the remainder for their 14 YO single malt. Most is stored on-site.

We all found the setting just gorgeous. The distillery is just across the street from the harbor and provides a beautiful view. The City of Oban is clearly a tourist destination. We were quite surprised to see how many tourists flocked to this little resort town. Our hotel was the King's

Knoll located up the hill from the harbor and it provided a great view. We went down into town to eat dinner at the Oban Inn. It was the start of great meals for the next ten days.

Day 2 started early as we had breakfast at the hotel and then headed through Fort William to the Isle of Skye and Talisker. The beautiful scenery required a number of stops along the way including the Mountains and Loch Linne. A stop in Ft William led to the discovery of a wonderful whisky store where some of our first purchases occurred. A drawbridge at Laggan led to a brief stop where we admired U.S. Air force jets flying about what seemed to be about 3 feet off the ground! Our final stop before Skye was at the Eilean Donan Castle where shutters fired away to get the best view of the castle. Some speculated that this was the location for some of the filming of the Highlander television series.

After crossing the bridge over to the Isle of Skye we headed for the Talisker Distillery. There was some trepidation because Talisker was another UDV distillery. However, thanks to groundwork laid by Jules, our fears were unfounded and we were about to partake in your first “cool guy tour” The term was coined by Nelson Reynolds as his way of describing tours that provided the behind the scenes and technical detail that are above and beyond the typical visit. This clearly met that definition.

Dorothy Morrison was our guide. We started by sampling a Talisker limited edition cask strength bottling that is only sold on site. Needless to say several bottles were carted off by our group. Dorothy told us that the distillery had to be rebuilt after a fire in 1960. The soft water comes from behind the facility which is soaked in peat. Anyone drinking Talisker knows that is an understatement. Only about 10 percent of Talisker goes for single malt. A heavy amount goes to the Johnny Walker blend.

As with most Mash Tuns, Talisker was made by Abercrombe Ltd and was 8 tons handling 70,000 Liters of water and mash. Also, almost all the distilleries we visited pre mixed their yeast and pumped it into their wash backs. Talisker has 6 Oregon pine wash backs each holding 53,000 Liters of worts some of which have lasted over 30 years.

There was one wash still and two spirit stills. All three were 14,706 Liters in size. It was unusual to see wash (low wine) and spirit stills the same size. Talisker used to be triple distilled but this was ended in 1928. The middle of the cut ran about 1 ½ hours with 15 minutes of foreshots and 2 ½ hours of feints. The middle of the cut usually was cut off at around 71 or 72 ABV. The philosophy being that the higher the percentage of alcohol in the feints the higher the spirit and the result is a shorter run. As with Oban, the decision by the Stillman to shift from the middle cut to feints is a function of the alcohol being produced but because of the experience of the stillman, the times are almost always the same. The decision on the length of time for foreshots appears to be more arbitrary. Talisker has become silent in March rather than July partly as a result of increased tourism in the summer. Some distilleries felt this was not wise because of the shortage of water in July but demands are changing how some distilleries do their work and this was an example of such a change.

Talisker produces about 35,000 to 40,000 liters per week with a staff of 8 full time employees. The keep about 4,500 to 5,000 casks on site. The oldest cask was filled in 1972. Talisker stopped

malting its own barley in 1972 and has usually has a phenol level for its peating around 25 or 30 ppm. The warehouses still have earthen floors. At the end of our tour Dorothy provided each of us a ½ bottle of Talisker 12 YO. What a wonderful end to the tour. Its one we will long remember.

We left Talisker and wandered around the back roads and found an area where peat was being cut. In violation of some law we were sure we picked up a bag full of peat for Pat to use for demonstrations back at the Dundee Dell. Eventually to the Hotel Dunollie in Bradford just ahead of a bus load of Italians. Dinner was good but the view of the water was even better. Willie then took us on an hour long ride to Elgol where we were privy to the most beautiful sunset one can imagine over the Cuillin Mountains. Even Nelson got out his bagpipes to play while we sampled the Talisker we were provided earlier in the day. Its hard to imagine a better ending to a day then this one.

May 23rd again started early with breakfast at 7:30 followed by our return over the Skye Bridge heading toward Inverness. Gorgeous views over Lake Cluanie and the Five Sisters Mountain Range made for a quick trip. Our first stop today was at Balblair. Definitely a “cool guy” stop. This was made possible by Willie who did a lot of advanced work to get us into a distillery that does not usually take visitors. We were met by Derek Sinclair the distillery manager. He noted that Balblair had been purchased by Inverhouse Distillers in 1996. Only about 5 percent of Balblair goes to single malts and much of the casks are sold for use in blends such as Ballentines. No single malt was sold on site but Derek noted that we could pick up bottles at Old Pultney in a few days since they had a visitors center and sold the 31 and 33 YO Balblair that many of us covet.

Balblair was originally a farm owned by the Ross family (no mistake that Balblair is located in Ross Shire) and began distilling in 1790 on a farm site across the road from the current distillery. The current site of the distillery was built in 1895 for 5,000 pounds. The distillery was shut down in 1911 and was used during both world wars as an airbase. It went permanently back in production in the 1970s.

This was a far cry from our first two stops. There was nothing “slick” about Balblair. It was clearly a working distillery from the old school. The water comes from a hill behind the distillery and actually goes through an old mill and reaches the distillery through a pipe. The water is very soft and peaty. Maltings on site stopped in the early 1970s. The huge Malt Bins were amazing to see holding 30 tons each. Balblair uses around 60 tons per week but has on-site capacity for much more than this.

Balblair uses Optic Barley strain currently and this was common among many distilleries we visited. They run about 4.25 tons through their Porteus Mill at any one time. The Mash Tun holds 20,000 Liters and after 3 infusions of water the worts are sent to one of six oregon pine wash backs each 22,000 liters of worts. The distillery uses 2 different kinds of distillers and bakers yeast which is pumped into the wash backs to begin a 52 to 54 hour fermentation process. Balblair does about 13 mashes a week.

The wash still holds 19,093 liters of 8% alcohol from the wash backs while the spirit still holds about 11,044 liters. Balblair has an old spirit still on site that is no longer used that is quite a bit smaller (8,182). Foreshots are only about 5 to 10 minutes in length. The middle cut takes about 1

½ to 2 hours but the feints are about 3 ½ to 4 hours long. The alcohol cut off averages about 70 ABV.

Balblair can store upwards of 28,500 casks on site but when we were there they had about 23,000 on-site. Earthen warehouses were the norm here and were very traditional. Derek took us back to a small tasting room where we sampled a wonderful dram before we had to take our leave. A great visit!!!

Our last distillery of the day was Glen Ord, another UDV facility. This tour was similar to Oban with a very “touristy” feel to it. A very small amount (10 percent or less) of this malt goes to single malts. Most goes to blends such as Johnny Walker and White Horse. The water comes from the White Burn and barley is purchased locally when possible. 12 ½ tons of malt is processed through the mill. The actual floor maltings stopped in the 1980s.

The mash tun holds 46,000 liters and the weekly process handles about 14 mashes per week Sunday through Friday. Glen Ord has 8 Oregon pine washbacks with 3 staffers on duty on 24 hour shifts. Yeast is liquified and infused into the washbacks for fermentation. Each washback handles 60,000 liters of worts with a capacity of 70,000 liters. Glen Ord produces about 3 million liters of spirits per year.

There are 3 wash stills and 3 spirit stills each with 17,000 liter capacity. Glen Ord also has earthen warehouse floors but much of the product is stored off-site but 12,000 casks are stored on-site. The spirit is aged in refill bourbon casks (hogsheads mostly). There is also some use of sherry casks. Casks are bottled at Levin near Edinburgh.

After our visit to Glen Ord we stopped by the Culloden Battlefield and actually returned to our hotel to find Bill Wakefield waiting for us. It was good to see Bill since he could share the drinking costs for the remainder of the trip! As a remembrance of our trip in 1998, several of us went over to the Glen Moray Hotel for a nightcap. Alas the Ness River Rhythm Kings were not playing this night!

May 24th we have dubbed the road to Orkney and after a quick continental breakfast we were off to Glenmorangie. As you may know Glenmorangie was one of our original stops in 1998 and one of our favorites. While Katherine was not there to greet us this time, we were in the excellent hands of Annette Mackenzie to show us around (cool guy definitely)!

As with Talisker, Glenmorangie has moved its silent season to March (as well as Easter and Christmas). This is an active distillery producing 2.9 million liters of spirit each year and processing 21 mashes each week. It was fun to actually taste the water that comes from the _____. As many know Glenmorangie’s water is hard unlike most distilleries we will visit. Each mash includes 9 ½ tons of grist and flows as worts from the mash tun to the stainless steel washbacks. Glenmorangie only uses 1st and 2nd refill casks for its spirits and while it has 12 full time staff it has ten times that number in sales people alone!

We left Annette and Glenmorangie after a shortened tour to make sure we could catch the ferry at Scrabster for our trip to Orkney.

We arrived at the ferry in plenty of time for a pleasant ride across the north sea to Orkney. We enjoyed the “Man of Hoy” a beautiful obelisk that sticks out clearly as we rounded the Island on our way to our port. Sheila and Elliot took time to point out Puffins and other birds that were plentiful on our two hour ride.

Wasting no time we headed right to Highland Park Distillery in Kirkland. This was one of the highlights of our trip. Patricia greeted us at the front of the distillery and took us immediately to task a draft of the 12 YO. We also viewed a film on the history of Orkney and Highland Park in a beautiful screening room. This was our first chance to see actually maltings on site. About 20 percent of the maltings are actually done on the premises. As with other distilleries, Highland Park uses Optic barley. They actually have 650 tons of barley on site. Seeing the mounds of grain was really striking.

The maltings were spread out on an 8 ton floor which was being turned every 8 hours as it germinated. Highland Park has 28 staff working at the distillery. We spent some time talking about the types of peat used in heating the barley - a mixture from very dense (moss), less dense (yirphe) and the least dense (fog). About two tons of peat is used to heat 8 tons of malt over a twenty hour period. The peat is infused at 20 parts per million.

It was quite a thrill to get a chance to actually turn the barley on the floor as it germinated, the climb up to the malting floor above the kiln and see how the process continues to be carried out in the traditional fashion. We even got to climb out on the roof to see the pagoda up close and personal! What a treat!

Highland Park processes 5 ½ ton mashes producing 30,000 liters of wort which is then pumped into 12 washbacks. The wash backs are a combination of Douglas Fir and Oregon Pine. As with other distilleries the yeast is put in creme form and infused into the wash backs. Samples are taking constantly to ensure it meets the rigorous specifications.

The wash still is brand new and holds 15,000 liters as is the older spirit still. 30,000 liters of worts generate 5,000 in spirit. Foreshots run ½ hour and feints begin when the ABV gets to 61.5 % alcohol. Stillman Alan Hutchinson was very helpful in providing this information.

Interestingly most of the casks for Highland Park are old Wild Turkey bourbon casks. The oldest Highland Park on site is 1967. Overall there are 25 warehouses holding over 47,000 casks of whisky!

The tour wound up with a wonderful vertical tasting including a cask strength bottling only available at the distillery, an 18 YO and a 21 YO. It was an outstanding end to the event.

The group made a quick trip over to Scapa even though closed it was important to wander around the facility since Scapa is one of the favorites of many of our group. We then headed for the hotel located outside Birsay on the Northern most portion of the Island. The Barony hotel proved to be a beautiful setting and owner/bartender/host Dave and his wife Anne treated us royally for the two days we were there. There are not many places where they ask you want scallops, lobster or crab

so they can go out and fish it out of the ocean for dinner the next night!

The next morning we headed for several historical sites including the Ring of Brogar, the chambered tomb of Maes Howe and the 5,000 year old settlement of Scara Brae..

On May 26th we had a quick breakfast on our way to the Ferry. Upon arriving in Scrabster we headed for our next distillery in Wick, Old Pultney. Since it was a Saturday we were doubly appreciative of Tanya meeting us at the door to do a tour even on her day off. We were also the beneficiaries of Tanya's daughter Lianna who was making her first visit to the distillery! What a cutie! Mark was also available for questions. He as with most of the staff can carry out most of the tasks at the distillery.

The visitors center was gorgeous and had only been open for about a year. It was located where the old cooperage operated. The distillery is a part of the Inverhouse group of distilleries so we were able to purchase Balblair as well as Old Pultney. We first tasted the 12 YO to begin our tour. Pultney used to be a part of the town of Wick and thus the name. Only about 5 percent is sold as single malt out of the 3 million liters produced each year.

Old Pultney produces 14 mashes per week. The wash still is 21,707 liters while the spirit still is 17,343 liters. All the casks are stored on site - over 20,000 in four warehouses. 8 staff persons keep the distillery functioning 42 weeks a year. There are 5 washbacks made of stainless steel and a mash tun that holds 4.5 tons of grist. The middle cut moves to feints when the percent alcohol falls below 70 percent.

After this wonderful tour we headed for town to see if we could pick up the last bottlings of the centenary edition of Old Pultney. As luck would have it the main whisky store had just enough bottles for all us to purchase. It was a good start to the day for us and a wonderful one for the whisky store as well.

We were once again on the road and heading for our next stop - Clynlis. We were met by Liz who also came to work just for us. The mash tun at Clynlis holds 12 ½ tons and 47,000 liters of worts. At this distillery located on the eastern coast of Scotland the water runs over peat and is soft as can be. The distillery has 8 oregon pine wash backs and along with the mash tun processes 170 tons of grist every week with 14 mashes over a 5 day period. The infusion of water ranges from 64 degrees at the beginning to 88 degrees during the 3rd water.

As with Old Pultney, Clynlis had 8 full time production staff. Much of the distillery's spirit goes into Johnny Walker. There are six stills, 3 wash and 3 spirit. Interestingly the spirit stills at Clynlis are bigger than the was stills. This distillery was rebuilt in 1967 and most of the facility dates back to that time including the mash tun and spirit safe.

Another highlight of this stop was to walk around the old Brora distillery across the road which maintains its beauty even though it is silent. Clynlis uses a mix of sherry and bourbon re-fill casks.

We said our goodbyes to Liz and got back on the bus to make our way to our hotel just outside Grantown on Spey - the Skye of Curr. We were met at the door by Aileen and Trevor who were just super hosts. Since we were going to be here for three nights we were thrilled about the accommodations and the company. Dinner for several of us included Gammon (ham) with fresh peaches on top and fresh veggies - After more than a few night caps we headed off to a wonderful sleep.

May 26th was one of the few times we had a late start being Sunday not a great deal would be open so we didn't hit the road until around 9 a.m. Our only distillery planned for the day was Glenfiddich but our real goal was a tour of Balvenie which was a must stop on this tour.