

The Kingdom of Fife Gilbert Summers

Travel writer Gilbert Summers takes us on a tour of the Kingdom of Fife.



Gilbert Summers has spent most of his career supplying information on Scotland to various tourism bodies and is author of a number of Scottish guidebooks. He has always enjoyed Fife, which he considers the very essence of Lowland Scotland, with its heritage of old links across the North Sea. His recently published first novel 'Dogskin Boy' even has a scene in the Scottish Fisheries Museum at Anstruther.

The Kingdom of Fife: classic Lowland Scotland and easy to reach by road, rail or air. But why a 'kingdom'? Even the folk who live there use the expression and they say that this area bounded by the two long sea-firths of Forth and Tay was truly a kingdom on its own - an independent Pictish state gradually subdued in the long Dark Ages battle towards a united Scotland.

First-time visitors will notice that the further east they travel in Fife, the greater grows the sense of a special identity. Glittering sea views, lush hedgerows and yellow barley, architecture that echoes the lowlands of Holland - and pale and peaceful skies as a reminder that the north-east part of Fife enjoys low rainfall and high sunshine hours. There is also a sense of well-groomed neatness, certainly noticeable in Fife's golf courses.

These are conspicuous in the typical Fife landscape. The polished greens and fairways are blended into the sand-dunes or woodlands, and not just around St Andrews. Across the rest of Fife there are more than thirty other courses. All this lies just across the water from Edinburgh, or about an hour from Glasgow, depending on your Fife destination.

If coming from the west then you meet another aspect of Fife first. The western part of the Kingdom, lying closer to the industrial heartlands of Scotland, inevitably played a part in the Industrial Revolution. Strictly speaking, the ancient Royal Burgh of Culross on the shores of the Forth, west of the Forth Bridge, pre-dates the Industrial Revolution. Its prosperity came from coal and salt, in mediaeval times and after. When industrial activities (based on more easily workable mineral deposits) developed in other parts of the central belt of Scotland, Culross declined. This meant that many examples of Scottish domestic architecture from the 16th-18th centuries have survived., and thanks to a programme of restoration over the years by the National Trust for Scotland, Culross is today not just highly picturesque – in fact, it looks like a film set for some costume drama - but more important, it is still lived-in.

Dunfermline, nearer the M90 motorway, was once a major centre of damask linen manufacture. In 1835, in a cottage in the town, a child called Andrew Carnegie was born into a poor weaving family. Soon the family decided that a better opportunity awaited across the Atlantic. Decades later, the millionaire philanthropist Carnegie became Dunfermline's greatest benefactor. This is where you find the *real* Carnegie Hall - as well as the cottage, now a museum, where Carnegie was born. In addition, the remains of a greatly modified complex of religious buildings, including church and palace, remain as a reminder that Dunfermline was once the seat of the Scottish Royal Court.

East of the motorway, the biggest town is Kirkcaldy, known as the 'lang toun' (long town) because it stretches out along the shore. In its museum, you can trace the history of Wemyss ware, the very collectable pottery formerly made locally. Kirkcaldy nods towards the historic at nearby Ravenscraig Castle, strategically placed on a rocky headland to guard the sea approaches to the capital across the Firth of Forth.

Immediately eastward, the coastal community of Dysart has had a colourful past as a trading port. Today, the Harbourmaster's House is restored and within, the Coastal Centre portrays the historic background and encourages you to explore the area, especially by way of the Fife Coastal Path. This runs all the way round for 150 km [94 miles].

Another phrase frequently heard locally is 'East Neuk'. Neuk is a Scots word for corner (like nook in English) and the East Neuk is a string of picturesque villages and their tidy hinterland, running away to the breezy tip of the Kingdom. They include the twin communities of Elie and Earlsferry, where a sheltered harbour is criss-crossed by wind-surfers and dinghy sailors - just one of the many places on the coast suitable for these sports. Here, the Fife Coastal Path passes by one of the more novel features of the coastline: the Chain Walk. Traversing a rocky stretch complete with caves, a series of fixed chains makes the going easier and definitely adventurous.

Continuing east, inland from the busy little harbour at St Monans, is the National Trust for Scotland's Kellie Castle, dating from the 16th/17th century and restored in late Victorian times, it is also worth a visit for charming walled garden run on organic principles.

Further along the coast, you'll find Pittenweem's white-harled, crow-stepped gabled houses round yet another busy harbour, where bright-hulled fishing boats gently creak. (It's enough to inspire you take up water-colour painting.) The name Pittenweem is from an old Gaelic word 'uamh' meaning cave and, sure enough, a cave, the shrine of St Fillan, still survives here, close to the harbour. They say this saint was able to write by night as he had a luminous arm. How useful would that be?

At Anstruther, the Scottish Fisheries Museum, housed in historic waterfront buildings round a central courtyard brings alive the past and present life of Scottish fishermen, by means of models, documents, artefacts, paintings and particularly effective tableaux. So it's appropriate that this salt-tangy place with the air of a traditional little resort is also associated with award-winning fish and chips.

The most easterly settlement on this attractive south-facing stretch of coast is Crail, one of the most photogenic of all the East Neuk villages. Here the architecture strongly echoes the Low Countries, a reminder of the ancient trading links with Holland. Crail's 16th-century Tolbooth, with its Dutch-cast bell of 1520, overlooks the old market place and the setting still seems to echo of long-vanished burgh market days – very atmospheric. But don't fill the camera's whole data card with pretty pictures yet – wait till you see the harbour, probably the most photographed one in all of Scotland. Wander along the shore here and you will also find a

fossilised tree stump and the tracks of three metre long millipede. (Yes, really - Crail is also one of Scotland top fossil spots!)

The main road turns west and north and soon reaches St Andrews - a town with a unique ecclesiastical heritage. Scotland's oldest university was founded here around 1410. These distinctions alone would guarantee interest for the visitor, even without the town's claim to be the spiritual home of golf and a place of pilgrimage for golfers from all over the world.

According to legend, a Greek monk called Regulus (or Rule) was shipwrecked off the coast while carrying relics of St Andrew. He founded a church associated with today's St Rule's Tower. It still stands near the ruined cathedral and probably dates from the early 12th century. St Andrews Castle, the former bishops' residence, is also worth visiting, notably for the unique survival from a 16th century siege: a mine and counter-mine, basically a failed attempt to tunnel under the castle. Will you be brave enough to follow in the footsteps of the sappers?

With sandy beaches above and below the town, a wealth of historic interest centred round cathedral, castle and university, a fascinating local museum, a wide choice of restaurants as well as a range of designer and gift shops, St Andrews certainly offers a diverse visitor experience. Best of all, everything lies within a few minutes' walk of its famous golf courses.

But this journey is just one way of reaching the eastern end of Fife. One of the attractive features of the area is the choice of routes. Fife is made for leisurely, short-break touring. That way, you can discover historic buildings such as the Hill of Tarvit, a fine Edwardian mansion with interesting collections of furniture and paintings, and an attractive garden, and Falkland Palace, definitely on the list of 'must sees'. The red-roofed village of Falkland with its pretty cottages is tucked below the rolling slopes of the Lomond Hills. In the centre of the village stands the impressive façade of the palace. It was once the hunting lodge of the Stuart monarchy and was built in the 16th century in an elegant Renaissance style.

Nature lovers and those seeking wide-open unspoilt places will head for the miles of beach and wood at Tentsmuir, north of St Andrews, or to the breezy slopes of the Lomond Hills Regional Park. Meanwhile, Cupar, St Andrews and Kirkcaldy will provide all the shops you might need, from High Street names to antiques and crafts. Families have a choice of aquarium visitor centres, at North Queensferry and at St Andrews, as part of a wider choice of family-focused places. And the quirky and downright unexpected certainly includes venues such as Scotland's Secret Bunker, a now abandoned government command and control centre – legacy of the Cold War! Add in a wide ranging cultural and events programme (including Scotland's oldest Highland Games, at the pretty village of Ceres), and Fife will guarantee to deliver a short break with unmatched variety. In fact, variety is the spice of Fife.