

KYRLE Probus member Jim Hamilton's holiday to the Orkneys and Highlands of Scotland by motorhome, provided a most enjoyable and informative talk to the club at its recent meeting.

Jim's excellent photography, accompanied by his equally pertinent commentary, took members to the heart of this historic archipelago just off the northern tip of the Scottish mainland, that boasts several millenia of ancient history.

Having arrived in Stromness after taking a high speed ferry from St Gill's Bay on the mainland, Jim and his wife Louise visited Skara Bray, Europe's most complete Neolithic village, older than the Pyramids and Stonehenge and a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

The small houses, that made up the village, were well laid out and were joined by underground passages, probably because of the severe Winters experienced. Now minus their roofs, these would have been made of wood and turf, Jim explained.

Nearby were the standing Stones of Stenness and the Ring of Brodgar, two of the best preserved prehistoric monuments in Britain and there was the impressive chambered tomb of Maeshowe, built more than 5,000 years ago and part of the Neolithic Orkney world heritage site.

A visit to the Midhowe Cairn and Broch on the small island of Rousay was also on Jim and Louise's itinerary. The cairn, a burial tomb has been protected within a shed and is like a small church inside, with a central aisle flanked by compartments made of massive slabs of stone.

The broch a short distance away was where the people lived and was very well built, with a number of floors. It had thick stone walls and a moat area round part of the outside. It is likely that the people who lived in the broch were buried in the Midhowe cairn.

As an antidote to the neolithic history of the Orkneys, there was the seascape and the superb array of bird life to admire, such as skuas, guillemots, eider duck, oyster catchers, as well as the seals. The RSPB has an office in Stromness with bird reserves in a number of places, said Jim.

Back on the mainland via South Ronaldsay, Jim and Louise headed south through the Trossachs, stopping on the banks of the Forth, before ending up in Edinburgh where Jim visited his 'alma mater.'