

# A CELTIC ODYSSEY

Anthony Gibson

"What I am is a Westcountryman. There is no finer sight in all the world than the tors of Dartmoor as the ferry nears Plymouth. The more I travel, the more I appreciate how deeply fortunate I am to have been born and lived most of my life in the South-West of England."

Anthony Gibson

This is an account of a journey in a camper van down the Celtic coast of Europe in the summer of 2008, from the most north-westerly point on mainland Britain, Cape Wrath, to Asturias, on the coast of Northern Spain, taking in Ireland, Wales, Cornwall and Brittany along the way. It was written as the author travelled along, usually at intervals of about two days, and was originally posted as a blog on the internet.

The author had the idea of *A Celtic Odyssey* a couple of years previously, when thinking about what he might do both to celebrate his planned early retirement from the NFU, and make the most of it. It sprang from a desire to reconnect with his Celtic roots, and from his love of the craggy mountains, desolate moors, beetling cliffs, sweeping beaches and pounding seas which characterise Europe's western seaboard. It had no serious academic dimension. If the author happened to spot themes that either connected or differentiated between the various Celtic races, then so be it. But he was really much more interested in drinking in the views, playing the odd round of golf on some remote Celtic links, sampling the local beers, catching the occasional wave and generally getting a feel for the places he was visiting.

Illustrated with his own photographs, this book is a wonderful evocation of the special character of Celtic countries, and an inspiring and affectionate story of a private journey of discovery.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Anthony Gibson** retired from the NFU in May 2008 after 36 years, mostly spent working in the West Country. He was born in Devon and has lived in the Westcountry throughout his life. Originally intending to make a career in journalism, in his time with the NFU he has helped steer the farming community through the two biggest crises of recent times - BSE in the mid 1990s and the foot and mouth outbreak of 2001. He has written various newspaper columns over the years and is currently a columnist with the *Western Morning News*. Besides his various roles with the NFU, he has also been an occasional cricket scorer and commentator for BBC radio. He is married to Claire, his second wife, and has three children from his first marriage - Joanna, Becky and George - all of whom are grown up and living and working in London.

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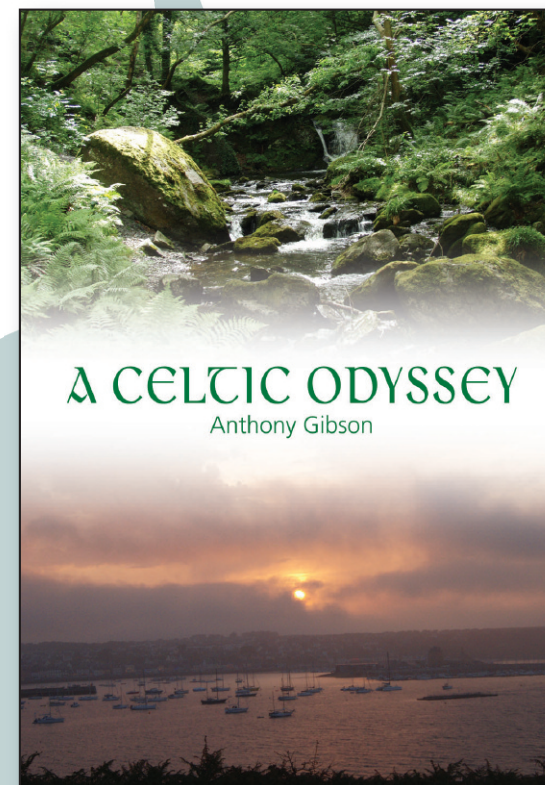
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## HALSGROVE TITLE INFORMATION



**Format:** Paperback, 96 pages, 210x148mm  
With 40 colour photographs  
**Price:** £8.99  
**ISBN:** 978 1 906551 14 8  
**Imprint:** Ryelands  
**Published:** June 2009



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Above left: From the Turk's Head, looking past St. Agnes' new quay towards Tresco.

Above right: The pub with no beer – the Old Forge at Inverie.

Left: A Celtic jewel – St. David's Cathedral.



At Cape Wrath.

Example of a double-page spread.

## A CELTIC ODYSSEY

moorland turf underfoot, and the larks singing their little hearts out up above, it was a golfing experience I will never forget, and it cost just £15.

The only person I've met who has actually visited Durness is the Western Morning News' esteemed Farming Editor, Bingo Hall. When I'd told him where I was bound he said instantly "Ha! In that case you must go to the Seafood Platter. Marvellous fish, straight out of Loch Eriboll". And do you know what, he was absolutely right! I had a platter of lobster, crab, mussels and langoustines, all as fresh as fresh could be. It was a memorable meal to end a memorable day. By the time I'd cycled back to the comforts of Carmen, I was so mellow, not even the voting in the Eurovision song contest could disturb my equilibrium. In fact, I thought Terry Wogan made rather a fool of himself with his huffing and puffing over the Eastern bloc's policy of mutual support. Just because the Irish hate their neighbours, it doesn't mean that everyone else needs to!

But where, I hear you ask, is the Celtic in all this? Well, if truth be told, the far north of Scotland owes a great deal more to the Picts and the Vikings than it does to the Celts. Cape Wrath apparently takes its name from the Norse word *hvarf*, meaning 'turning point'. Which describes very well the precise geographical meaning of 'cape'. It is a headland that marks the dividing line between two seas: in this case the Atlantic and the North Sea. The only other cape in the UK is Cape Cornwall (which is where I learned all this), where the Atlantic meets the Irish Sea.

But going back to matters Celtic, I did note that the highest cliffs on mainland Britain, a couple of miles east of Cape Wrath, towering 900 feet above the churning Atlantic, are called Clo Mor, and that has distinct echoes of the cliffs of Moher in County Clare, which are the highest cliffs in Ireland. Someone will no doubt tell me that they are both Norse rather than Celtic in origin, but for the moment that is my Celtic connection and I'm sticking to it!

Apart from the obvious one, of course: the Gaelic language, which is still spoken by a few of the locals here. I thought I'd encountered one such when I clambered on board the little ferry across the Kyle of Durness, when the ferryman said something completely unintelligible to a cuffer from Fraserburgh, who is on holiday here with his wife. I met up with them again in the evening, at the fish restaurant, and asked about the conversation. He laughed. "That wasnae Gaelic. That man was drunk. He hasnae been sober for the past five years!"

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### SUNDAY, 25 MAY 2008

May 27. Cullinst tower...

I have done Durness a grave misservice. It isn't the 'John Lennon Memorial Hall'; it is, in fact, the 'John Lennon Memorial Garden', which is in the grounds of the hall and, if a little wind-blown, represents a genuinely moving tribute to the village's most famous adopted son. The claim is made – and I'm sure it is true – that it was his fondness for Durness that inspired him to write 'In my Life', which happens to be just about my favourite John Lennon song.

Anyway, when I get home, one of the first things I'll do is to download 'In my Life', and for ever after it will remind me of beautiful, hospitable, elemental Durness – the village at the end of the world.

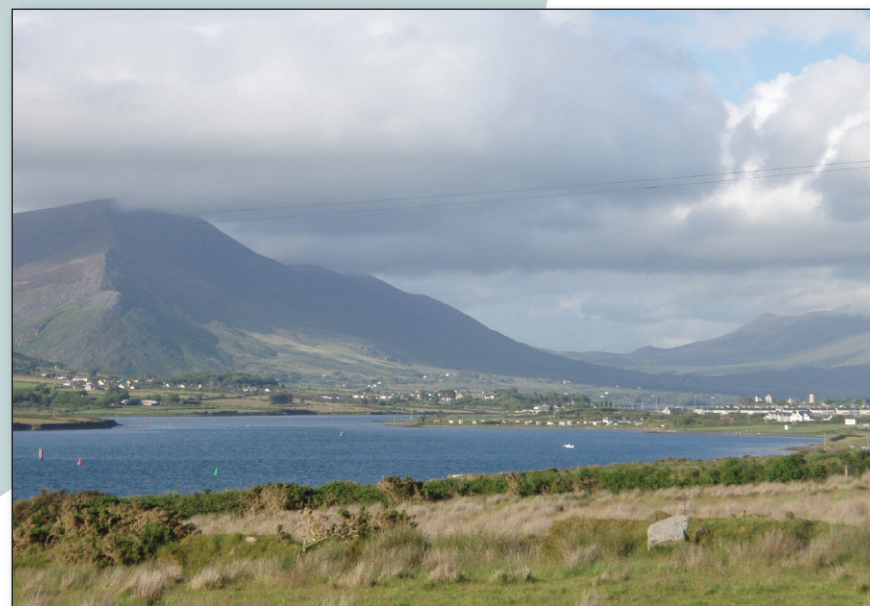
### WEDNESDAY, 28 MAY 2008

May 27. Cullinst tower...

... above my campsite, which is routinely spectacular. It is at Glenbrittle, on the south west of the Isle of Skye, I am parked virtually on the beach,



Campsite at Glenbrittle on Skye



Mannix Point, with the mountains of Kerry beyond.