



A Broken Twig

By John Jones

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What would you do, if you found a time-machine?

Yes, that's right. You would keep it for yourself, which is exactly what Geoffrey Maitland did up in the far north of Scotland, when he was recceing a walk from Shegra to Keoldale across the rocky mountainous regions where it was easy to get lost.

Well it wasn't exactly a machine, more of a swirling void.

Trouble was, he was an experienced hiker and Rambler of thirty plus years and could read a map like the back of his hand, but he still found himself off the route he was intending to take, and wandering aimlessly around, trying to find his bearings.

Near the top of a craggy hill which he had climbed in order to see his surroundings, he came across what he thought was a pond. It was surrounded by shrubbery and tall grasses and he guessed he could rest here and take stock of just where he was going.

When he looked into the pond itself he found not water, but a swirling vortex. Like a miniature black-hole, except it was more white and blue, spinning around like a hurricane. He could feel a kind of pull, where gravity was stronger, and had to step back in order to resist its effect.

However, it seemed the weather had other ideas, and as he stepped away further, a gust of wind suddenly pushed him off balance, pushed him forwards, and the gravitational effect took its grip on him and he could do nothing but fall into the void.

It wasn't long before he was thrown out of it. Out of the reach of its effect, and he lay on the ground wondering just what on earth had happened.

After he had gathered his bearings, tried to make a note of how to find it so he could tell his friends, he continued on his way to find a route back to some sort of civilisation, only to find in the distance, in the middle of a valley where he had come from, a small village.

That was definitely not there before, he had thought, as his route had taken him through the same place, so he decided to go down to it, only to find some movement, people, dressed differently. He could see them clear enough to know that something wasn't right. The atmosphere was different, and he guessed these people weren't dressed this way for the fun of it, for some historical festival. There were several thatched roof stone cottages, a hay-barn and a couple of wooden tenements.

If it was film set, or a recreation, it looked too realistic, and there was nothing there to suggest it was modern day. It looked medieval.

He saw a few more people and they were all dressed in similar attire, and that was when he decided not to approach, because something in the back of his mind came straight to the front. Even his watch told a different time than what he was sure it was.

He turned and headed back to the vortex.

When he went through school and university, Geoffrey had a penchant for things scientific. He studied chemistry, but still there was always part of his psyche reserved for the unknown, the spiritual. He believed in powers much greater than what science had discovered. Yet he guessed when such things were revealed, science would claim it. If you told a person five-hundred years ago that there would be such a thing as television, or aeroplanes which can take you anywhere in the world, they would have thought you mad, but science is a slow process, and probably needs to be, because where would we be if the cavemen had had computers?

People are shaped by their beliefs, and Geoffrey quickly came to the conclusion, as he headed back up to the vortex, that he had gone back in time.

He stood before the swirling void, feeling its pull, and could just about see the edge of the village from his vantage point.

He allowed himself to go with the gravitational pull and fell in.

Only to be ejected as before a few seconds later. He quickly stood up and ran to where he could properly see the village. To find it gone. He made his way back down there and after five minutes was walking amongst the ruins which nature slowly seemed to claim back. If your mind was elsewhere as was Geoffreys when he passed through earlier, they hardly warranted a second glance, but now here they were, overgrown with grass and soil, reclaimed by the ground.

The same village he had just seen.

Yet he had to make sure, so made his way back up the vortex and jumped inside.

He was soon on a rocky outcrop, looking down at the village, as it was, the same as before. People milling around. Daily life. Activity.

He realised that he could be spotted, so climbed back to the vortex where he knew he could not be seen.

I must have gone back a few hundred years, he thought, and jumped back into the void.

When he came out he wrote as best he could the location of it, and tried his best to get back on to what he was originally doing.

Clambering his way down, through a valley and along a ridgeway, he came across a path, a pathway that led to a narrow road which cut its way through the region. He knew that from here he could find his way back on track.

He found where he was on his map and continued to make his way to Keoldale.

What would his friends think? he thought. He'd found a way into the past. A link into Scotland however many years ago it was. They won't believe me, he thought, but some of them may be convinced. They certainly will be when I show them.

However, the closer he got to Keoldale, the more he came to understand that it was probably best he tell nobody, for the reason he turned and ran back to the vortex when he realised he was in the past.

Should he have spoken to anyone in the village, or should they have even seen him at all, then such actions will have repercussions for the future. Things will change, may not happen. Like the butterfly flapping its wings really can affect tornados in America, even if someone had looked at him sat on the hillside, and wondered who it was, those few seconds could be precious, could maybe effect something in the future that could well have happened had they not been spotted at all. If he brought attention to himself simply

by treading on and breaking a twig, then the timeline could well start to veer in a different direction.

A broken twig, could indeed, change the world.

So talking to somebody then was out of the question, because in the future he may not then exist, as it could have affected his parents Doreen and Charlie meeting up.

They might not have met at the local discoteque. While Charlie was out on the dancefloor with his flares, multi-coloured shirt and droopy moustache, busting moves out to the new sensation of rock 'n roll, and Doreen watching him from the side with hearts in her eyes falling smitten at that instant, unable to do anything but go over there and join him, then perhaps the resultant Geoffery may not have been born had they not have met.

When Doreen badgered her friend to come with her to the disco to hear this new fangled music, this bad influence according to her friend's father, and depending on how dominant he was in keeping her behaved in the way he thinks was best for her, where his way of thinking, his opinions and values were the only ones of any merit, where nothing else would do and alternative thoughts discouraged. It's my way or no way at all, then where would society be if everybody kept order? If they obeyed the rules.

Society gradually changes and twists around to new ways of thinking partially because children rebel against thier parents.

If Doreen's friend had obeyed her father and stayed in and not gone out to listen to this rock 'n roll, this scourge of society corrupting the nation's youth. If she had obeyed and not rebeled like so many other children, just 'became' their parents, then society would stagnate. Whatever influence Doreen's friends father had, he was losing as she grew older. He and the mother were slowing unlocking their grip, as were thousands of other parents, watching as their children took up the influences of the day, and

civilisation gradually changed, leaving those behind who were set in their ways and wanted their offspring to be like them, because their way was the 'right' way to be. It's my way or nothing, and you will be the same.

Thankfully children disobey their parents like Doreen's friend, who went to the disco anyway leaving her father sitting in his armchair with his arms folded, a sour expression on his face, because if he wasn't sat there like that, Geoffery would not exist.

Even if those parents had not met. If an appointment was missed, or cancelled, or they were late, where time was a major factor as to whether or not life changing events happened. If the milkman had not seduced Mrs Bramble from number 46, then little Bobby would not have been born. Little Bobby who went on to found a shoe factory creating hundreds of jobs. Jobs that affected the lives of the employees where the pay would give them a standard of living that improved their lives, where new friends would form and babies born. People coming in to give their ideas and opinions. Shall we expand? Shall we raise the prices? Shall advertise more?

A person who sees one of those adverts by a road-side in the south of the country and stops to look at it for a few moments which makes him late for the bus to go and play in an important football match, which means the bus whose driver has no patience, 'Oh I'm not waiting any longer', left without him, meaning his replacement in defence may go on to bigger and better things, changing his life, all because of an eye-catching advert for a shoe factory that would not exist, where it not for the glint in the milkman's eye.

If an asteroid was heading straight for Earth, then anything that could knock it slightly, even a millimetre, could change its trajectory, and it would miss, changing everybody's life in the process, and they wouldn't even know it.

It was hard for Geoffery not to tell his friends, not to tell anyone. The temptation was strong, and he told his ramblers group that the walk he was recceing was not viable. The route needed would be much longer than anticipated, more of a round trip, and they reluctantly agreed and sent him on another one from Kearvaig to Achiemore.

At his home, in a caravan park near Oldshoremore beach, he lived with a community of others who had similar lifestyles, the caravans embedded permanently with permanent residents. There were several on the other side of the car-park where tourists could stay but whether they did or not it didn't matter because money was not too much of an issue. He was fifty-seven years old, lived alone, although divorced three times he decided to just accept the fact he would be a singleton and thought that even if another opportunity came around to walk back down the aisle, he would probably not take it. Old age beckoned, and he was set in his ways, in his routine, and he was happy with it. With dark, floppy hair, he always wore the same jacket most days despite the weather. He was quite 'weathered', as though he'd been down-trodden for years.

In the days after discovering the vortex, he couldn't get it out of his mind, and with the notes he had taken, he tried to find it again. This time driving as close as he could get in his beat-up little Honda civic.

From where he parked, on a lonely desolate road, it was a five mile trek over hills across fields, through mountainous regions, but he found it. There it was, swirling around and he felt no fear as he jumped inside.

He was thrown out again, rolling over and standing up. He stood on an outcrop, surveying the village in the distance, sure no-one there could see him, but everything was the same as it was in the past and he did a quick overview of his surroundings to make sure nobody was around, would not chance upon him, but the nearest person it seemed was down

in the village. It was the only place of any activity for miles around.

This must be anywhere from the 12th to the 19th century, he thought. It was a nice sunny day and a few birds circled in the sky, and he wondered that he should not even be seen by animals, as maybe somewhere down the line even they could have some sort of effect.

After around two hours he made his way back to the void, and back to his own civilisation.

He stayed for a few days in his present, at his rambler's meetings, and caravan park barbecues, trying to be normal, but still the vortex had invaded his mind, and when he parked up at the same place to walk the five miles, he took from under the passenger side seat a good pair of binoculars, and was soon trekking his way through the hills and into the past.

Sat upon the rock, he surveyed the village below through his binoculars, having made sure nobody was near and saw exactly what he had suspected, and it reinforced his belief that he really was in the past. There was nothing modern anywhere. People milled around and went about their business in what seemed partly to be a farming village. At the far side from his vantage point there were fences where he could see several grazing cows and sheep along with a couple of horses, and several chickens who simply wandered around the village.

After around an hour of just observing, he decided he would go back to the vortex and without fear leapt back into his present, but instead of making his way home, he went down into what was left of the village. The layout was partly visible. There was some masonry left of the wall of the haybarn, some of the interior of a stone cottage where it looked like there had been a fireplace, and now that he looked more closely, bits of what looked to be pottery dotted here and there. A place also that looked like it

could have been a workshop hadn't been completely reclaimed.

He decided to go back home, and perhaps do some research. The nearest library was in Achriesgill, but he guessed it may be worth a visit because although he wasn't exactly a technophobe, he didn't have access to the internet. He did have a mobile phone, but all it did was call and text. In terms of modern technology, an ancient device.

One of his friends at the ramblers meeting in Durness did have a new internet phone and he kept up to date, but was reluctant to part with it so Geoffrey could look something up.

He asked him to look up old Scottish villages. His friend was curious, asking why and reluctantly handing over his phone when he had looked it up online, but what it said was more general, talking about Scottish life, about various clans and castles. Nothing nailed down to what he wanted to know. When he started trying to type in his friend interjected by taking the phone back and telling him the talk and slides by one of their members was about to begin, about their journey along part way of what used to be the East-West Silk road trade routes. When the lights went off and the screen came on, Geoffrey could do nothing but fold his arms and watch.

The following day he loaded up on petrol and drove to the library.

There was hardly anybody in there and he enquired about using the computers. The kindly woman behind the desk tried to help him set up, and he had to make an account because with the library being far away from where he lived he had no reason to join. The books he read he simply bought, but after a good ten minutes, the woman not really knowing herself what to do, he was finally surfing the web for information on old Scottish villages.

It didn't tell him too much other than what his friend's phone had told him. It was more about Scottish history and details on things which were not what he was searching for. He tried old Scottish maps, and there it was. There was the village. It was rather crudely drawn and was nothing more than a few white squares out in the highlands for 1652, so remote and small it didn't have a name, but that was all. That was the best he could find.

So while Scotland was writing its history, and battlefields rang to the sound of clashing steel, and the monarchy was breaking, the village simply got on with life, out of the way, maybe not even being aware of what else was happening beyond the mountains.

The internet didn't mention anything else and he wondered if he could find anybody that knew their history who might have known about the village, but what could they say? he wondered. Yes, there was a village, and that's about it.

How far could he go? Could he even trust himself not to say anything?

No, not really, envisioning his mind screaming for him not to say anything but his mouth having other ideas.

'I've found a portal into the past'.

No, he decided he knew enough, and was happy with that.

Although at the caravan site, and at ramblers meetings, he did kind of ask rudimentary questions incase anybody had further information. Usually at such clubs or societies, somebody would know a lot about a certain subject and if you asked there would bound to be somebody who would have an answer, but with this he just invited curiosity. Thinking he had just developed a sudden interest in historical villages, as everybody knew him at the ramblers, it seemed curious that he should start asking questions, but he put it down to a new hobby, a new interest, and their curiosity in him left. So he was interested in history, so what? him and millions of others. It turned out

not many of them knew much, other than the normal famous history, and the only morsel he got was from Mrs Beresford who always walked her dog along the coast every morning.

'Well I do believe there was a village around here in the past, but that's all I know'.

It really was all she knew. There was a village, now it's gone. That's it.

The next time he ventured out there it was teeming with rain and the wind buffeted and pushed him all the way there, and when he jumped inside, it was rather similar. The sky was grey and it was raining slightly. There wasn't as much activity in the village, but a few people milled around.

He sat for a while having checked his surroundings should anybody happen upon him and simply observed the village through his binoculars.

When he went back to his own civilisation the temptation to tell people had subsided. One person even noted that he'd stopped enquiring about old Scottish villages and Geoffrey had said it was just an interest in local history, nothing more, and nothing more was said and he never asked.

The club had organised a ramble from Portnancon to Sarsgrum and on the walk were two new members. He wondered perhaps if he would risk a ramble, or a walk back in 1652.

He was embroiled in club activity for the next few days developing a walk leadership project and organising a stall for a marketing event down in Glasgow, but he found the time to drive back to the parking space and trek through the fields, valleys and mountains to the hill, and it wasn't long before he was sat on his rock, observing through his binoculars.

The village was as it was. Life moved as normal, and he was convinced he could not be seen nor happened upon. He

noticed there were a lot more trees, but where he was, and around the village there was none.

Perhaps, he thought, it might be worth the risk to venture out a little bit further, keeping strict the fact that he must not be seen by anyone or anything.

If he went in the opposite direction to where he faced the village he knew it was sloping fields and hills, down towards a lake.

So slowly, cautiously, he walked a little further out, observing his surroundings like a hawk. It wasn't too dissimilar to his present except there was more foliage, more trees, and more flowers here and there.

After around a mile, he saw the lake, but dared not venture down there. Not until he was feeling brave enough. Perhaps even fish could alter the timeline, if it was not caught because of him.

He scrambled his way back and leapt into the vortex, leapt into his present.

Back at home he was involved in a meeting of caravan park residents because of a proposed purchase of the park by a chain company. They had offered the owners a tempting package, but the vote was a unanimous no, and so for a while the owners hid their faces because they had even considered it.

Everything was going smoothly at the ramblers and he reced the Kearvaig to Achiemore route, including a lot of coastline.

He found time to go back to the vortex and rambled his way there from his parked car, and sat upon his rock surveying the village. Everything was as it was and he ventured out a little further, braving the lake. He knelt and put his hand in the water, and a wave of apprehension came over him then. This was too much. Too dangerous. He headed home.

He led the first ramble on the Kearvaig to Achiemore route but he was disappointed to find only three members turn up. It was the same with most clubs and societies across the world. Memberships fluctuated. Sometimes they'd be queuing to get in, and sometimes there would only be a select few there, and the question of recruitment was a constant. How can we increase membership? was a common question all clubs asked at some point.

He was also disappointed to find he wouldn't be going to Glasgow to help with the stall as he was not needed, so led another long trodden familiar route with five members this time.

At the caravan park, it was quite rare to get one of the tourist caravans occupied, but this time a back-packing New Zealand couple stayed for a few days on their way to wherever they felt like moving on to, and such was the curiosity about them they were intergrated by the residents into joining them at barbecues and sometimes into caravans when it rained.

They were a middle-aged couple, Adele and Craig. Adele had recently given up being a fitness instructor and Craig was a construction worker whose contract ended and they had both snapped up the opportunity to go back-packing around the world.

They were a welcome addition to the area as they liked to talk, and when it was time for them to leave the residents were sorry to see them go, so normality returned and Geoffery found himself with time to visit the past, and taking a detour to fill up with petrol, he drove to the familiar parking space and walked the fields and hills, the wind blowing and the temperature fairly low, but into the vortex he jumped.

When he came out it was a bright, sunny, warm day, and he observed the village for a while before deciding he would venture out a little further.

Observing his surroundings as he walked he saw no-one, only a few birds circling in the sky in the distance.

He cautiously braved walking further east for around a mile and a half before spotting a river curving through a valley. He made his way down there. Grasses and shrubs sporadically lined the water's edge and he walked up to the flowing water, knelt down and splashed his face. It felt good, cold and fresh.

When he opened his eyes, there was somebody staring at him on the other side.

A little girl of about seven, kneeling down to fill a bowl locked eyes with him.

Fear began to rise within Geoffery, and he stood up, backed away, then turned and ran as fast as he could back to the vortex.

He leapt into the void and emerged back into his present. The weather was the same, the sky slightly darker throwing down specks of rain. He hauled himself as fast as he could to his car, but at one point he had to lean against a rock to regain his breath.

Onwards he went, walking, running, walking, running, until eventually he came to where his car should have been.

Except it was gone.

He collapsed and stayed there for a while regaining his strength as he knew he would have to make his way the three miles to the caravan park.

Knowing he would have to start sooner rather than later, reluctantly he continued the trek back home.

He knew he may not see any people on his way so wasn't too surprised when he saw nobody as he was out in the sticks in the Scottish countryside in cold and rainy weather. So

after around an hour he walked the path to the caravan park.

As he got closer he could see something wasn't right.

There were no caravans.

Not as they were anyway. They were broken and smashed, strewn across the park.

There were also no people.

He panicked and ran down towards the beach, but stopped as he saw other caravans and cars smashed, scattered along the sand and some in the water along the shoreline. A car alarm was blaring somewhere down there, but he could still see no-one.

He sighed in despair, walked across to a rock, sat upon it and gazed out to sea.



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