

Old Meets New In Waterloo

Article courtesy of the Globe and Mail

A region of contrasts, Waterloo is home to both the Perimeter Institute for Theoretical Physics and old order Mennonite farms where horses still provide the plowing power. Those Mennonite farms and villages attract bus loads of visitors to the rolling green hills north of Waterloo, particularly to the town of St. Jacobs, famous for its sprawling year-round farmers' market, one of the largest in Canada.

Shop for Waterloo County staples: maple syrup, apple fritters and summer sausage (a salty salami that keeps in warm weather). In a community known for its quilts and crafts, one of St. Jacob's most unusual offerings is Hamel Brooms where traditional craftsmen make corn brooms that look fit for a witch.

If it's authenticity that you crave, explore the back roads and villages north and west of Hwy. 7-8, between Waterloo and Stratford and you'll make some surprising discoveries, not the least of which is Castle Kilbride: not a castle per se, but close enough to warrant curiosity. This yellow brick mansion was built on the proceeds of a flax empire. James Livingston, once a poor Scottish immigrant, became wealthy enough to have trompe l'oeil murals painted in his hallways of his new mansion.

In 1878 the Berlin Daily News marveled that "the finest and most comfortable residence in the County" was built in what was then the middle of a flax field. Baden is still a pretty modest town—even with its newly built subdivision. But like several of its Waterloo County neighbours, Petersburg, St. Agatha and Heidelberg, it is home to a historic tavern.

EJ's still boasts its original bar and pressed tin ceiling, which, according to Castle Kilbride Curator Tracy Loch, "was painted by the same artist who created the murals at Castle Kilbride. He dined at the tavern, but didn't pay his bill, preferring to paint instead. Whether or not it's true, we can't be sure, but it makes for a heck of a good story."

Snuggled into a bend in the Nith River, New Hamburg has many charms, not the least of which is its handsome downtown, a designated heritage district with a mill pond, park and what locals claim is the world's largest wooden water wheel, although it no longer powers any of the industries in town. It's a delight to shop for ladies wear at old fashioned Murray's Clothes or peruse the shelves of Upper Case Books, which according to proprietor Kristen Hahn, is the old-est commercial building in town



Castle Kilbride Museum, National Historic Site, Baden
Restoration by +VG Architects

By contrast, in uptown Waterloo, the corner of Erb and Caroline Streets juxtaposes old and new. The vintage tour train that takes tourists on sightseeing excursions to St. Jacobs departs from in front of the Perimeter Institute.

Across the road, the old yellow brick facade of the former Seagram barrel warehouse, now the Centre for International Governance, is reflected in the mirrored glass of the Balsillie School of International Affairs, proving that Castle Kilbride's owner was only one of a long line of ambitious entrepreneurs to make their name in this region.

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