

# 'ALL HAIL THY PALACES AND TOW'RS'

The life and times of Robert Burns are stories often told, but less well known are the connections that bind 'Caledonia's Bard' to many properties now in Historic Scotland care. Ken Simpson and Lorna Ewan take us on a guided tour



A statue of Burns, 'Caledonia's Bard'

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In Scotland's Year of Homecoming, and with the associated celebrations of our national bard's 250th anniversary, it is worth considering what Robert Burns had to say about his land and heritage.

His urge to write of all things Scottish is clear: 'The appellation of a Scotch Bard is by far my highest pride... Scottish scenes, and Scottish story are the themes I could wish to sing. I have no greater, no dearer aim than to have it in my power... to make leisurely pilgrimages through Caledonia; to sit on the fields of her battles; to wander on the romantic banks of her rivers; and to muse by the stately tower or venerable ruins, once the honored abodes of her heroes.'



Of Melrose,  
the poet noted  
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glorious ruins'

But despite Burns's tours around Scotland, and into the north of England, his description of the built landscape rarely extended beyond the south west lowlands with which he was so familiar. Rather, about the places he knew, he drew evocative pictures. Looking towards the ruins of Lincluden Collegiate Church, near Dumfries Burns composed the final version of "Ca' the Yowes to the Knowes":

*Hark, the mavis' e'ening sang  
Sounding Clouden's woods amang  
Then a-faulding let us gang  
My bonnie dearie.*

We know Burns had some vocabulary of architecture but he made no mention of the grand structure. Writing of the central events in "Tam o' Shanter", he

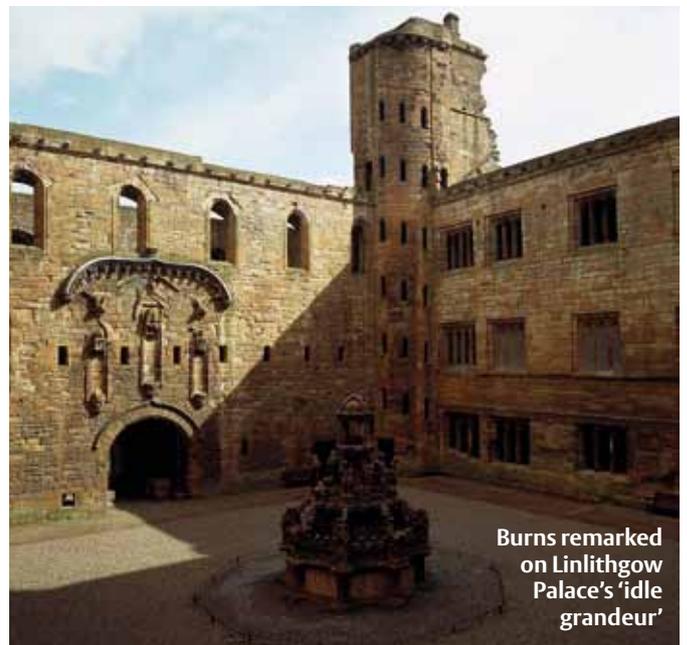
described the view into Alloway Kirk as 'through the ribs and arches of an old gothic window'. However, of Edinburgh's architecture and form, he makes only passing reference – 'All hail thy palaces and tow'rs' – leaving no specific observations about the city's architectural landmarks.

For Burns, the farmer-poet, the potential for travel was limited. Yet for a significant part of 1787 that is precisely what he was doing: between early May and late October he toured various parts of Scotland and we know he visited many historically important sites. Towards the end of his year of travel he wrote: 'I have done nothing else but visited cascades, prospects, ruins and Druidical temples, learned Highland

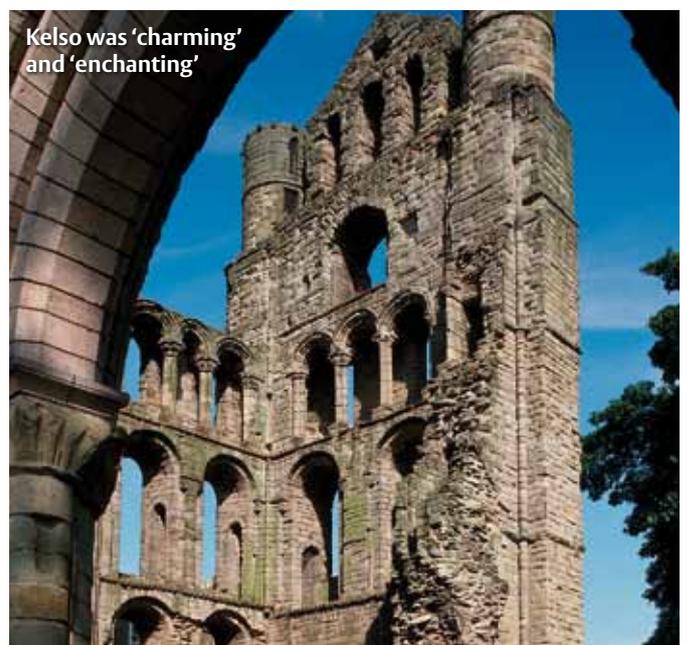
tunes and pickt up Scotch songs, Jacobite anecdotes...'

Burns's travels had been prompted by his successful sojourn in the capital in the winter of 1786–87, following the success of the first edition of his *Poems*. Such was what he termed his 'meteor-like novelty' that on 17 April 1787 he published an enlarged edition of the *Poems* with the list of 1,300 subscribers running to 38 pages, and on 23 April he sold the copyright to William Creech for one hundred guineas.

Previously content to be the poet of rural Ayrshire, Burns now found himself playing a national role. At a Masonic dinner in Edinburgh he was toasted as 'Caledonia's Bard' and, though 'downright thunderstruck,



Burns remarked on Linlithgow Palace's 'idle grandeur'



Kelso was 'charming' and 'enchanting'

and trembling in every nerve' he readily assumed the office. It was now time to explore his realm, but he was a tourist with a purpose, as he explained to the Earl of Buchan:

'Your Lordship touches the darling chord of my heart when you advise me to fire my Muse at Scottish story and Scottish scenes. I wish for nothing more than to make a leisurely pilgrimage through my native country; to sit and muse on those once hard-contended fields where Caledonia, rejoicing, saw her bloody lion borne through broken ranks to victory and fame...'

Four tours followed. The first took him to the Borders from which he made his only two forays into England; it lasted from 5 May to 1 June 1787.

From 25 August to 16 September, Burns toured the Highlands with the Master of the High School of Edinburgh, William Nicol. Of this journey Burns wrote, '[it] was perfectly inspiring, and I hope I have laid in a good stock of new poetical ideas from it'. Burns's tours convinced him of the need to preserve the native song-culture, so while he wrote many songs, he adapted or reset many more. The first volume of James Johnson's *Scots*



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**“ Burns's travels were constrained and he is rarely thought of as a tourist. Yet for a significant part of 1787 that is precisely what he was**



The countryside around Stirling stimulated Burns's feelings for Scottish history

*Musical Museum*, published 22 May 1787, had included three songs by Burns. When volume two appeared on 14 February 1788 it contained 32 of his songs, the harvest of his tours.

Burns's awareness of his status as 'Caledonia's Bard' seems to have heightened his sense of his country's history. His journal-entries provide tantalising glimpses of his visits to many historically important sites. So, after visiting Kelso, where he enthused over the 'charming situation... fine bridge over Tweed – enchanting views & prospects on both sides of the river, particularly the Scottish side', he proceeded to Roxburgh, where he noted, 'ruins of Roxburgh castle – a holly bush growing where James 2d of Scotland was accidentally [sic] killed by the bursting of a cannon'.

A few days later he was at Melrose and recorded, 'dine there and visit that far-fam'd glorious ruins', Melrose Abbey being the burial-place of the heart of Robert the Bruce.

Burns's visit to Linlithgow, 25 August 1787, produced an emotional response: 'Linlithgow, the appearance of rude, decayed, idle grandeur... the old royal palace a tolerably fine, but melancholy, ruin – sweetly situated on a small elevation by the brink of a Loch – shown the room where the beautiful injured Mary Queen of Scots was born – a pretty good old Gothic church – the infamous stool of repentance standing, in the old Romish way, in a lofty situation. What a poor, pimping business is a Presbyterian place of worship, dirty, narrow and squalid, stuck in a corner of old Popish grandeur such as Linlithgow and, much more, Melrose! Ceremony and show, if judiciously thrown in, absolutely necessary for the bulk of mankind, both in religious and civil matters.'

Later, in early summer 1790, Burns wrote "Lament of Mary Queen of Scots on the Approach of Spring". Of it he remarked, 'Whether it is the story of our Mary Queen of Scots has a peculiar effect on the feelings of a Poet, or whether in the inclosed ballad I have succeeded beyond my usual poetic success, I know not; but it has pleased me beyond any late effort of my Muse'.

Stirling and its surrounding area particularly aroused Burns's historical sense. His journal entry for 26 August records: 'Come on to Bannockburn – shown the old house where James 3d was murdered – the field of Bannockburn – the hole where glorious

Burns admired the surroundings of Elcho Castle from across the River Tay



Bruce set his standard.’ The experience made a lasting impact. In a letter of August 1793 Burns wrote to George Thomson, ‘...the old Air, “Hey Tutti Taitie”... has often filled my eyes with tears. – There is a tradition, which I have met with in many places of Scotland, that it was Robert Bruce’s March at the battle of Bannockburn. This thought, in my yesternight’s evening walk, warmed me to a pitch of enthusiasm on the theme of Liberty & Independance, which I threw into a kind of Scots Ode, fitted to the Air, that one might suppose to be the gallant ROYAL SCOT’S address to his heroic followers on that eventful morning’. He added in a postscript, ‘I had no idea of giving myself any trouble on the Subject, till the accidental recollection of that glorious struggle for Freedom, associated with the glowing ideas of some other struggles of the same nature, *not quite so ancient*, roused my rhyming Mania’. Scholars speculate that the more recent struggles may be the Jacobite rising, the French Revolution, the American War of Independence, or the libertarianism of the Friends of the People; the result was “Robert Bruce’s March to Bannockburn”, now familiarly known as “Scots, Wha Hae”.

## JOURNAL ENTRIES FROM 1787



Above Broughty Castle, near Dundee Below Elgin Cathedral, Moray

### CASTLE CAWDOR

On 4 September 1787 Burns recorded the following of Cawdor, which is not under Historic Scotland ownership: ‘Come on to Castle Cawdor – where Macbeth murdered King Duncan – Saw the bed in which King Duncan was stabbed’; and on 7 September this: ‘The muir where Shakespeare

lays Macbeth’s witch meeting is still haunted – that the country folks won’t pass it by night’.

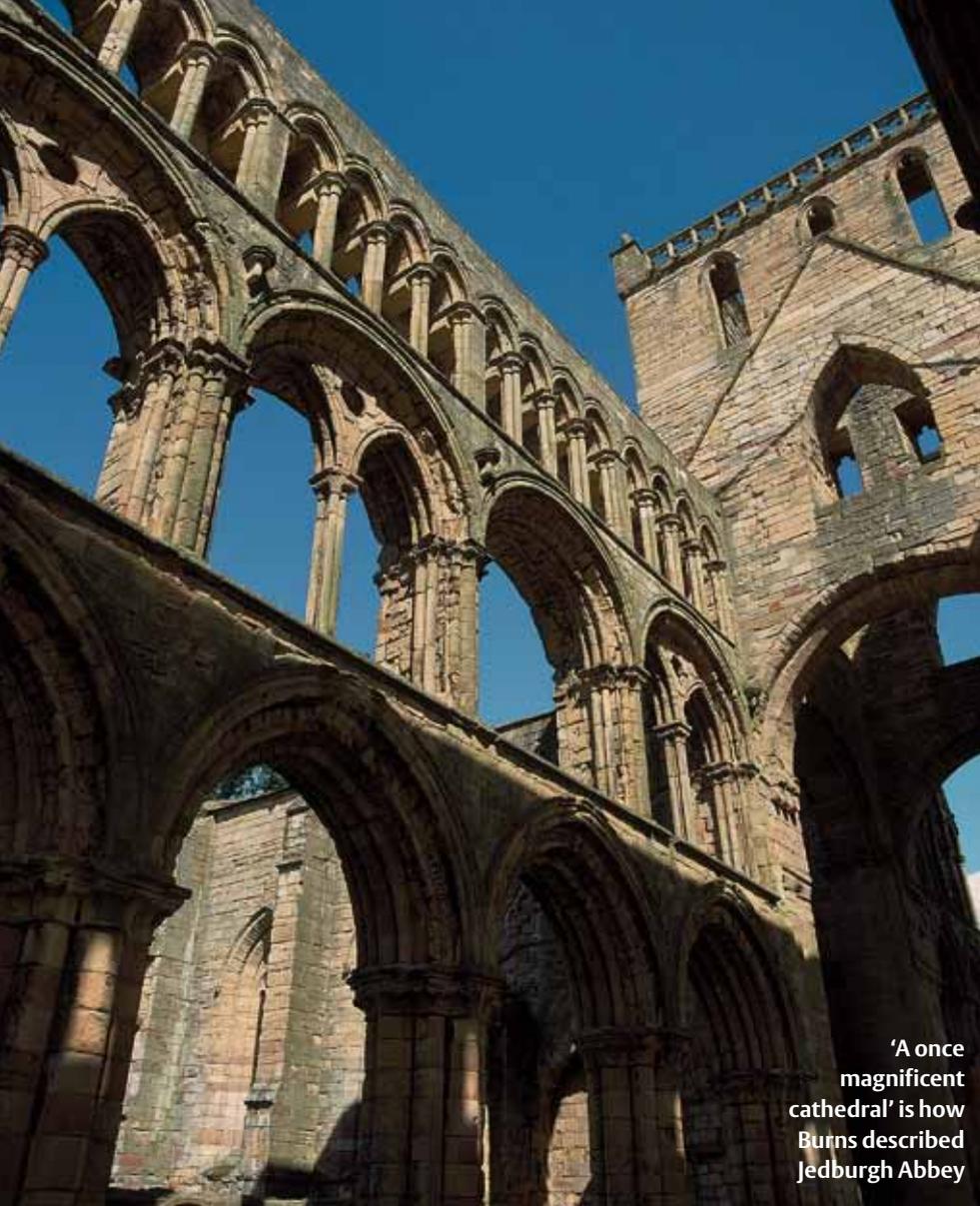


### BROUGHTY CASTLE

‘A finely situated ruin, jutting into the Tay’, noted Burns in his entry for 13 September 1787.

### ELGIN CATHEDRAL

An entry on 7 September 1787, notes ‘venerable ruins of Elgin Abbey – a grander effect at first glance than Melrose, but nothing near so beautiful’.



'A once magnificent cathedral' is how Burns described Jedburgh Abbey

Burns's sentimental affinity with the Stewarts surfaced again when he witnessed the ruined state of the ancient hall of Stirling Castle. Back at the inn he scratched these lines on the window using the stylus which the Earl of Glencairn had given him:

*Here Stewarts once in triumph  
reign'd,  
And laws for Scotland's weal ordain'd;  
But now unroof'd their Palace stands,  
Their sceptre's fall'n to other hands;  
Fallen indeed, and to the earth,  
Whence grovelling reptiles take  
their birth.  
The injur'd STEWART line  
are gone,  
A race outlandish fill their throne;  
An idiot race, to honour lost;  
Who knows them best despise  
them most.*

Burns's declarations of Stewart sympathies were forceful but sporadic. Sites with more recent historical association such as Ruthven Barracks and Fort George were merely noted in his journal without comment; and from Urquhart Castle he proceeded

## “ He enthused about one lady, only to observe that her décolletage was inappropriate for one of her years

to Culloden, prompting the entry, 'reflections on the field of battle', but offering no elaboration.

Unsurprisingly, Burns cast a farmer's eye over the land through which he travelled. On the Borders tour he noted, 'climate & soil of Berwick shire & even Roxburgh shire superiour to Ayrshire... turnip & sheep husbandry their great improvements... wash their sheep before shearing – 7 or 8lb of washen wool in a fleece'.

With sight of Elcho Castle across the Tay, he savoured the 'rich harvests and fine hedge rows of the Carse of Gowrie' but made no direct mention of the castle itself. It was as both farmer

and patriot that he waxed lyrical about the view from Stirling Castle: 'Just now from Stirling Castle I have seen by the setting sun the glorious prospect of the windings of Forth through the rich carse of Stirling'.

The evidence confirms that James Mackay was correct in stressing, 'For Robert, landscapes were secondary to the men and women, especially the women, who peopled them'. Aged 23, Burns wrote, quoting Alexander Pope, to John Murdoch, his former tutor, 'the joy of my heart is to "Study men, their manners, and their ways"'. Inevitably, Burns's comments on others say something about himself.

At Jedburgh he once again turned his attention to the people he met. Introduced to the Reverend Dr Thomas Somerville, Burns noted that he was 'sadly addicted to punning'. After James Currie published this comment in 1800, Dr Somerville was apparently cured of his addiction.

By his own acknowledgement Burns had 'ae wee faut'; or, as he put it more formally to Dr Moore, 'My heart was completely tinder, and was eternally lighted up by some Goddess or other'.

In Jedburgh he enthused about one lady, only to observe that her décolletage was inappropriate for one of her years. He was captivated by Miss Isabella Lindsay, daughter of the local doctor, but his attentions were thwarted by two jealous older women.

Burns concluded his visit with the following words: 'Took farewell to Jedburgh with some melancholy, disagreeable [sic] sensations... Sweet Isabella Lindsay, may Peace dwell in thy bosom, uninterrupted, except by the tumultuous throbings of rapturous Love! That love-kindling eye must beam on another, not me; that graceful form must bless another's arms, not mine!'. In fact, Isabella was already engaged and she married days later.

Apart from two excursions to Galloway with John Syme in the summers of 1793 and 1794, his travels in 1787 marked the extent of Burns's activity as a tourist. Despite acknowledging that he had done 'nothing else' but visit landmarks and historical sites that summer he left us only intriguing glimpses of the influence those sites had upon him. Nonetheless it is hard to believe that his works would have been quite as rich without those experiences.