

A Visit With Robbie Burns

By Judy Hardin Harkin, Journey Home Consultant

This month, Scots and those of Scottish heritage around the world will be participating in Robbie Burns Suppers to commemorate and celebrate Scotland's Bard. Grand as that title is, I rather suspect that Robbie would prefer another accolade often associated with his work, the People's Poet. He wrote about, and for, the common man and it is those poems that continue to resonate with people of all nationalities around the globe.



This past September, my husband Duncan and I visited the Robert Burns Birthplace Museum in Alloway. Although we spent the whole day there, there was not enough time to see and do everything that the museum offered. Still, it was a wonderful experience. Will you join me in a walk through the memory of that day?

As we walked along the Poet's Path, the pedestrian walkway that leads to the museum complex, we quickly learned to look up as well as down. Weathervanes depict characters and scenes from the poem *Tam o' Shanter*. Suddenly we were face to face with "the wee, sleekit, cow'rin', tim'rous beastie" immortalized in *To a Mouse*. Not very "wee", but friendly just the same.

We first visited the cottage where Robbie was born on January 25, 1759. He lived there the first seven years of his life. A white-washed, thatched cottage, it contains four rooms: the barn, the byre where Robbie's mother Agnes churned butter to sell at market, the "spence" or parlour, and the kitchen. Each room reflected the life of a small farmer and his family.

The spence was intriguing as it was here that young Robbie would have been taught by his tutor, and also where the family gathered at night as father William read the Bible. In the kitchen was the box bed where Robbie and three of his siblings were born. Outside the door was a herb garden and the kailyard or kitchen garden where Agnes grew vegetables for the family.



The Statue House contains life-size statues of Tam o' Shanter, Souter Johnie, and Nance Tinnock. Lovely gardens surround the Statue House and the Burns Monument, which was opened July 4, 1823. It is a short walk to the Brig o' Doon bridge over the River Don. It was here that an inebriated Tam o' Shanter raced across the bridge on his trusty mare Maggie, followed by the maniacal screams of the witches. By daylight, it is a restful place – verdant fields dotted with contented sheep, the River Don gently flowing. But remembering Tam's story, I'm glad to reach the *key-stane* (keystone) at the arch of the bridge because—as everyone knows—witches and other evil spirits can't cross running water.



The Auld Kirk was already a ruin in Robbie's time. It is here that William and Agnes Burnes, Robbie's parents are buried. It is an evocative place "where Ghaists and Houlets nightly cry".

Every facet of Robbie's life and times is touched upon in the museum itself. There are many treasures there – items that belonged to Robbie, letters in his own hand, his sayings – in broad Scots - etched on each display.

Robert Burns not only wrote poems, he also collected traditional Scottish songs and tunes, saving many from obscurity and thus adding to Scotland's rich cultural heritage. He also penned original love songs such as *A red, red rose* and ones filled with national ardor. *Scots wha hae* and *A man's a man for a' that* continue to resonate with Scots and those of Scottish heritage today.

Robert Burns accomplished so much in his 37 years and the Birthplace Museum makes his life come alive.

At the close of the Burns Supper this month, as we sing *Auld Lang Syne*, the song will mean so much more to me now that I have been to the Ayrshire village where Robbie was born. Thank you for walking through the memory of that day with me. I hope you enjoyed the journey.