

THE LEGEND OF THE WINE TOWER

FRASERBURGH LIGHTHOUSE

Isobel Fraser was the only daughter of Alexander, eighth laird of Philorth, and founder of the free port of Fraserburgh. She had not been spoiled, being brought up a good Protestant, despite her mother's leanings towards Rome. By the time of her 18th birthday, Isobel had grown into a fair-haired beauty. One night, looking out to the landward side of her father's castle, which sat high on the cliffs of the Buchan coast, she heard a haunting pipe tune. Staring into the starlit night she caught sight of a small figure. As the figure got closer, she realised it was a young man playing the bagpipes. As was the custom at the time, travelling musicians were welcomed into every house to entertain and be recompensed with food and a bed for the night. Isobel was delighted when she saw the youth approach the main door and gain entry. She ran downstairs to see the talented stranger.

With a swish of her silk gown, she reached the main hall where her parents and brothers sat. The piper was being introduced by the laird's butler. His name was Sandy Tulloch, and he was travelling the country, trying to earn enough money to buy a commission into the army. Isobel's father was impressed by this and asked him to play for them.

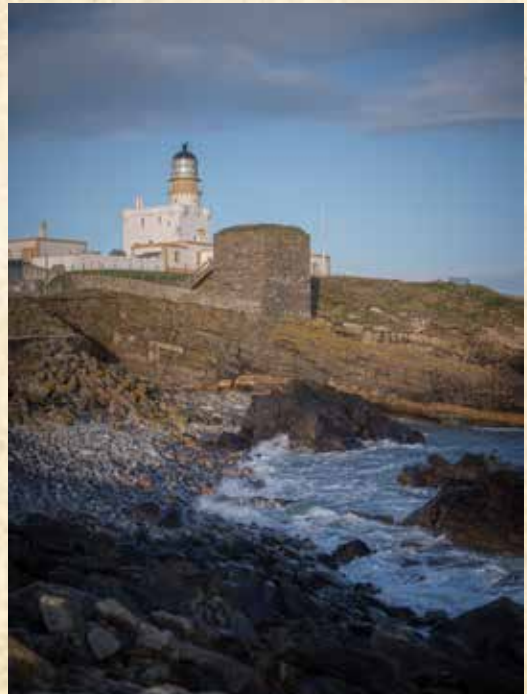


The Wine Tower, Fraserburgh

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Well, Sandy was a very capable player; he stunned them with reels and jigs, war-like marches and, much to Isobel's delight, the most beautiful pibrochs and laments. She sat by her mother, lost in the music and falling head over heels in love with this red-headed, plaid-clad youth. Eventually the laird thanked Sandy and bade him to dine with them and stay the night for his pains. Over dinner he regaled them with fascinating stories of the places he had visited, starting in his native Orkney, sailing over the sea to the mainland, visiting the former Viking strongholds of Caithness, journeying through the Highlands down eventually to their North-East coast. He hoped that by the time he reached Edinburgh, he would have enough money to kit himself out as an officer and present himself to the King for service.

By the end of the evening he was shown to a guest room and the family retired to bed. Isobel, however, could not sleep. She wandered about in her own room, unable to stop thinking about the handsome, humble Sandy. She then heard a strange noise and went to investigate. She found Sandy back in the main hall, playing on his chanter. Isobel had never seen one before, and Sandy was happy to explain to her that this was the way pipers practised and learned new tunes. The pair talked all night. Isobel apologised for keeping him awake, but Sandy said he didn't mind, he had so enjoyed having company after many miles on the road.



Fraserburgh Lighthouse and the Wine Tower

Sandy said he would not leave the area in a hurry, so she would not be losing him. And so it was, every evening following, Sandy and Isobel met up down by the shore, away out of sight of the castle. Their friendship blossomed into love and then a promise of marriage. Sandy said they would get engaged and go to Edinburgh, where they would be married, and he would join the army. Little did they realise Isobel's father had followed his daughter that night, puzzled as to where she was sneaking off. He stifled his rage as he heard Isobel accept Sandy's proposal. He went home and spoke to his servants.

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By the time Isobel came home, Sandy had been seized by a dozen sturdy men and bound in chains. He was led to the Selchie Hole, a coastal cave which flooded at high tide. The cave stood below the Wine Tower, which was the secret chapel of Lady Fraser, the laird's wife, Magdalen.

When Isobel entered her father's room at the top of the house and asked what he wanted, she could see his eyes were full of anger. "How dare you consort with that piper laddie! He is far beneath you, you're a laird's daughter, and yet I heard from your own mouth the acceptance of his offer of marriage! You have no right to bring such shame on the Fraser name!" Alexander roared. Isobel was horrified. "You followed me?"

"Yes, and it is as well I did, you would have left tomorrow and we would never have seen you again!" Alexander snapped. "As it is, that is the last you will ever see of your poor lover, he has been dealt with!"

"What? What have you done to Sandy? Where is he?" Isobel demanded.

"Where he will meet his fate, now, you must forget about him, I will find you a suitable husband, some earl's son at least, but never ever would I let you marry a commoner!" her father told her.



The Wine Tower, Fraserburgh

Isobel screamed in protest and ran before her father could rise. She guessed at once where Sandy would be, the Selchie Hole, which would be full of water! But before she ever got outside, the servants stopped her. Isobel howled that she would end her life if she could not see Sandy. Her father was so furious he dragged her by the arm down to the Wine Tower. "You'll see your husband-to-be in the morning!" Alexander exclaimed and locked her in. Isobel spent a dreadful night listening to the waves crash against the rocks, knowing that Sandy would be drowned by morning. She wept piteously, praying that somehow he might escape.

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The next day, the laird unbolted the tower door and pulled Isobel to her feet. “Come, see your lover’s fate!” he growled. Standing in the cave with a huge lantern, Alexander indicated the sodden form of Sandy Tulloch, his chained body lying dead on the floor. Isobel ran to him and flung her arms around his corpse. She screamed and wept, vowing she would stay and drown herself now she had nothing to live for. “Foolish madam, you will stay in the tower until you come to your senses!” Alexander told her and took her back to her prison.

Isobel realised that there was a wooden stair which led to the roof of the tower, and after her father had gone, she clambered up and found the hatch. Standing on the precarious flat roof which had no battlements to protect her, Isobel walked to the edge and looked out at the boiling sea which had taken Sandy’s life. She clasped her hands, as if in prayer and said aloud: “Farewell, all of earth’s good. Our bridal waits below the tide.” Then Isobel ran over the edge, soaring into the air for a moment, then crashing down to her death on the rocks below, her blood splashing into the spray.



The Wine Tower, Fraserburgh

It was a few hours before one of Isobel’s brothers came to visit her, but before he even reached the tower, he saw her broken body at the base of the tower. He carried her back to the castle, tears streaming down his face. He walked

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slowly upstairs to the hall. “What have you done, father? What have you done?” he cried. Alexander Fraser did not speak, knowing his selfish adherence to social convention had caused Isobel’s death. He did not speak for many months after. Still today the rocks below the Wine Tower are bright red, repainted by the lighthouse keepers who inhabited the castle long after the family had died out, in memory of poor Isobel Fraser and her beloved piper.

Of course, this is a legend; Alexander Fraser had three daughters, none named Isobel, and all married to local noblemen. He was favoured by James VI, who gave him the right to build a free port and burgh around the old fishing village of Faithlie, which became Fraserburgh. The Wine Tower was used for many things, including a chapel for Lady Fraser, who was a Catholic, and had to worship in secret.

Yet folk still say they can hear pipes playing on a stormy night and Isobel’s ghost has reputedly been seen leaping from the Wine Tower. The Scottish Museum of Lighthouses now owns the tower, which is next to the old castle, one of the earliest lighthouses on the Moray coast, operational from 1786. The Wine Tower is occasionally open for tours, but you can still see where the rocks have been painted red in memory of this enduring tale of star-crossed lovers.