

Supernatural
Tales
of
Aberdeenshire



Preface

Discover north-east Scotland's undiscovered treasures in [Fraserburgh and Buchan](#). Walk and wander to your heart's content on the sandy beaches and along cliff-tops; observe Scotland's only mainland gannet colony (yes, the fish is good too!), and learn about the lives of generations of local people who have fished and worked there. Cruden Bay's most famous holidaymaker, Bram Stoker, drew inspiration for his greatest literary creation **Dracula** - from these very shores. One of Fraserburgh's most notorious tales concerns the **Wine Tower and the Laird's Daughter** – but don't forget to also discover Peterhead's **Ghosts of the Plague**.

A little further south you can uncover the delights of [Bennachie](#) and [Forvie Sands](#) – land of the **Demon Priest**, the **Devil's Stane**, **Twice Buried Mary** - and not forgetting **Jock the Giant!**

[Royal Deeside](#) is where the Queen's summer residence can be found, but was once home to **Lumphanan's witches**. Discover this beautiful valley on a touring route; the [North East 250](#) is a circular touring route incorporating the north-east coast and Speyside's whisky country.

In the south of Aberdeenshire, [The Mearns](#) has dark tales of **aristocratic cannibals**, and a **female assassin with a grudge against a king** to offer. The Mearns is also where a mystical **Kelpie** once roamed – but now it's more famous for its award-winning fish and chips and quaint fishing villages like [Johnshaven](#).

For more information on Aberdeenshire, explore [VisitAberdeenshire](#).

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BRAM STOKER AND CRUDEN BAY

THE SCOTTISH ORIGINS OF DRACULA

A tall, broad-shouldered figure in a black cloak crouches by the sandy shoreline; he stares across at the wave-lashed Scaurs, black, unyielding rocks in the North Sea...

This was Bram Stoker, creator of the world's most famous vampire, Dracula, and, for a few months each summer, resident in the old village of Port Erroll at Cruden Bay. Although respected and loved by the community, the Irish author and theatre manager did sometimes act very strangely when writing his Gothic tale of the blood-sucking Count. His wife Florence and son Noel would avoid him when he was "acting up", but it was no surprise when we discover his employer was Henry Irving, the foremost actor of his day and perhaps, the inventor of "method acting". Irving would seek to feel the actual emotions of his characters so as to give an authentic performance. It would therefore seem this had rubbed off on Stoker who stomped about the cliffs near Cruden Bay and Whinnyfold, trying to feel like his vampiric creation.



Slains Castle, Cruden Bay

BRAM STOKER AND CRUDEN BAY THE SCOTTISH ORIGINS OF DRACULA

Although Whitby, North Yorkshire, has been closely associated with Dracula for decades, as it appears in the novel and many film interpretations, it was to this remote fishing village in North-East Scotland that Bram Stoker came to find inspiration for his Gothic masterpiece. Cruden Bay also symbolised a retreat from Stoker's responsibilities as the business manager of the illustrious Lyceum Theatre in London, the latter owned by the aforementioned Henry Irving. Stoker had a very specific remit, his proposed bolthole had to be on the east coast, in the north of Scotland, and, having consulted many Ordnance Survey and geological maps, be somewhere between Peterhead and Aberdeen. He took a train from London in the summer of 1892 (according to a later article by the local newspaper, *Buchan Observer*), and started walking from Peterhead along the coast.



Cruden Bay

Despite being a very sickly youth in his native Dublin, Stoker had become a sportsman; at over six feet in height and well-built, he was an imposing sight. He had already published two books before he came to Scotland, but had a long-standing interest in Gothic literature through his friendship with fellow Irishman, Sheridan Le Fanu, famous for his own female vampire *Carmilla*. Cruden Bay, it turned out, was exactly what Stoker was looking for. He telegraphed Florence and Noel to join him immediately, and thus the legendary association began.

BRAM STOKER AND CRUDEN BAY
THE SCOTTISH ORIGINS OF DRACULA

The Kilmarnock Arms Hotel, then owned by James Cruickshank, still has the visitors' book containing the Stokers' signatures, which helped trace their visits during the period 1892-1910. Stoker latterly stayed at two different cottages in the village, Crooked Lum Cottage, owned by Isy Cay, and Hilton Cottage, which belonged to the hotel. It was at Hilton Stoker had a view from the garden of the imposing Slains Castle, seat of the Hays of Erroll. Stoker would sit in there every day and write at a small table with the castle in sight. It is no surprise that he was influenced by it.

The evidence for this influence appears early in *Dracula* when Jonathan Harker meets the Count for the first time and is escorted into an octagonal room. Slains has an identical room which still exists today and served as a reception hall with doors leading out to the rest of the property. Local resident Mike Shepherd, while researching Stoker's love affair with Cruden Bay, was sent a photograph from the present-day Hay family, showing the "octagonal hall" in 1900. The written description in *Dracula* fitted perfectly. Thus it is very likely Stoker, who mixed with the cream of London society in his work, had been invited to visit Slains by the Earl of Erroll, and had seen the room and used it as the template for *Dracula's* entrance hall.



Kilmarnock Arms Hotel, Cruden Bay

Stoker was heavily influenced by the folklore of the area in the first book he wrote while in Cruden Bay. This was *The Watter's Mou*, a smuggling tale set in Port Erroll, using actual personalities as models for his characters, such as the local coastguard, whom Stoker befriended. By the time Stoker wrote *Dracula*, he was well-versed in tales of supernatural happenings and the local Scots dialect. Mike Shepherd discovered that Stoker referenced his fisher neighbours by putting a Doric phrase into the mouth of a Whitby fisherman in *Dracula*, namely "Dinna fash," i.e. don't worry. This is not a Yorkshire phrase, and used almost exclusively in Aberdeenshire, thus Stoker clearly wanted to demonstrate the book's origins.

Bram Stoker loved Port Erroll, and found the fisherfolk "authentic", according to his great-grandnephew, Dacre Stoker, a Canadian sports coach. Dacre suggested that the London elite with whom his ancestor mixed were somewhat superficial, but the Scots had no pretensions, which Bram loved. Taking part in local events such as fundraising fêtes, horticultural shows etc, the Stoker family were generously accepted by the communities of Port Erroll and Peterhead. Even after Bram died, Florence contributed a recipe for "Dracula Salad" to a cookbook published by the local Women's Rural Institute.

Thus, Slains Castle, the fisherfolk, the folklore and the landscape served to inspire Bram Stoker to create his vampire nobleman, and to write nine other books, some also with Gothic overtones such as *The Lair of the White Worm* and *The Mystery of the Sea*. *Dracula* has inspired filmmakers, writers and actors to this very day; in 2019, local theatre and circus skills group *Modo*, based in Peterhead, created a performance piece entitled *Doricula*, using a script written in Scots by author Robert Stephen (already known for his Scots edition of *Aesop's Fables*), performed at Slains. To hear "Dracula" speak in Scots was a confirmation of the area's influence on the character and the book's landscape.

Slains Castle, though now a ruin, is exactly what the visitor would expect, a crumbling Gothic ruin above treacherous cliffs, battered with sea spray. The *Kilmarnock Arms* still operates to this day; anyone can come and experience Stoker's Cruden Bay for themselves.

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.

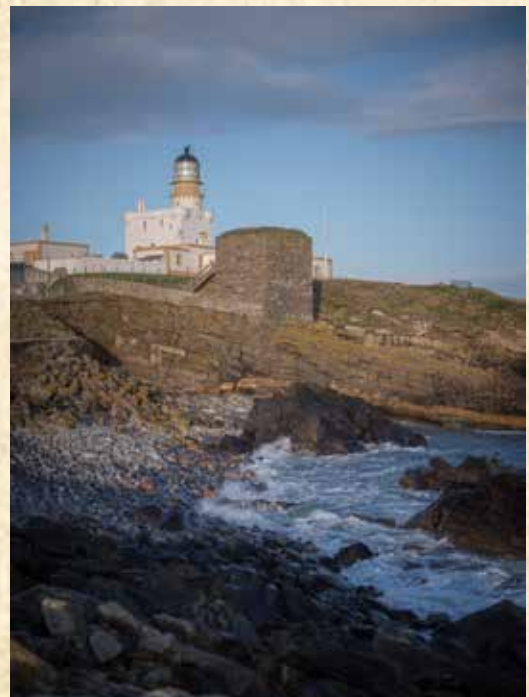


The Wine Tower, Fraserburgh

THE LEGEND OF THE WINE TOWER
FRASERBURGH LIGHTHOUSE

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.

THE LEGEND OF THE WINE TOWER
FRASERBURGH LIGHTHOUSE

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.

THE LEGEND OF THE WINE TOWER
FRASERBURGH LIGHTHOUSE

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

THE LEGEND OF THE WINE TOWER
FRASERBURGH LIGHTHOUSE

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.

GHOSTS OF THE PLAGUE

GADLE BRAES AND IVES ROAD, PETERHEAD

The Plague was believed by medieval citizens to be a divine punishment, and thus the dead were dumped as far away as possible from the living to avoid spreading the disease. Georgian folklorist and author, Peter Buchan, a native of Peterhead, was quick to attribute blame to a housemaid employed by one Robert Walker. She had inherited a chest of clothes from her recently deceased aunt in Leith but did not know it was the plague that had killed her relative.

Buchan criticises the maid's vanity in wanting the clothes and "opening a Pandora's box" of contagion when she opened the chest and supposedly inhaled the germs from inside. She and her employer both perished. The Plague had free reign as people foolishly attended the funerals of the dead, despite warnings to keep away. Eventually the inhabitants in the nearby villages of Old Deer and Longside came and barricaded the town along the border of the Kirkburn, the stream which separated the original part of the town from the links and South Bay. The old wooden tolbooth, situated on the Seagate, was razed to the ground, prisoners and all, for fear it too was a source of contagion.



Ugie Hospital, Peterhead

Around 350 people died when The Plague struck in 1645 and wooden “fever huts” were constructed in the area of Ive Park, a common grazing ground near the sea. Some huts were razed with the corpses inside, others moved a distance away and interred in a mass grave liberally sprinkled with lime to speed the decomposition of the disease-ridden remains. Ive Park and Gadle Braes were a no-go area, left fallow for a century, the ruined huts demolished and covered with earth.

However, after consulting surgeons at the Royal College in Edinburgh, the town managers agreed to return Ive Park to its former use in 1774, allowing the taxpayers to get back their grazing land.

Another equally hideous disease, cholera, was raging in Europe around the 1830s, and the Peterhead authorities wished to build a fever hospital and form a new Board of Health. However, the taxpayers were in no hurry to surrender their land again, so the scheme was shelved. In 1865, the year Asiatic cholera arrived in Britain, the town managers were finally able to purchase a two-roomed house in the fishing enclave of Roanheads in which to accommodate a fever hospital.

The first permanent hospital was established in Ive Park from 1880, right on the site of the plague pits! Locals knew this as the “old” Fever Hospital, which, like the Roanheads’ site, was a traditional “but-and-ben” style cottage. By the turn of the century health authorities deemed it way below the standards for a medical facility. A replacement was completed in 1907, built near the ancient salmon house which had been founded by Earl Marischal, George Keith in 1585. There were uninterrupted views of the Ugie Estuary, perhaps the reason that the building became known as the Ugie Hospital. There were 14 beds which were pressed into service almost immediately after a severe outbreak of typhoid made its appearance that year. Historian Robert Neish comments in *Old Peterhead*: “it was entirely due to the enlarged accommodation available for patients [...] that a serious epidemic was averted.”

GHOSTS OF THE PLAGUE
GADLE BRAES AND IVES ROAD, PETERHEAD

The old fever hospital did not officially close until 1933, and was eventually demolished to make way for social housing. Ives Road, Gadle Braes and Ware Road now stand on the site of the ancient plague pits. But the inhabitants of the new council houses soon discovered that the area's past history had not quite finished with them. Rumours of taps on sinks and baths being turned on without human intervention began to circulate. Stories of children's voices being heard around the windows at night also started to spread. Amateur "ghost hunters" speculated that this unexplained phenomenon was caused by the spirits of plague victims attempting to slake their thirst, unaware they had already died. Perhaps the poor ghosts finding the old Gadle Mineral Well had run dry, saw the living with their clean water taps and decided to help themselves?

The community around Gadle Braes today is known for its annual bonfire, which dated back to the construction of the Ugie Hospital. Bonfire organiser Marco Alexander observes that it is the largest bonfire in Peterhead, constructed of wooden pallets and huge commercial cable reels donated by local businesses. Fire would certainly keep The Plague at bay, and nothing has been heard of the ghosts in a long time.



Ugie Hospital, Peterhead

HELEN ROGIE AND MARGARET BANE WITCHES OF LUMPHANAN

“Thou art indicted as a common witch, by open voice and common fame...” These words were spoken in April 1597, at the trial of one Helen Rogie, aka Mrs Helen Strachan, wife of John, who lived at Findrack, near Lumphanan. She would later be burned at the stake, accused of causing the death of her own daughter-in-law Bessie by maleficarum, that is, witchcraft with intent to harm. Her mother, Margaret Bane, a resident of Kincardine O’Neill, had been executed the previous month on similar charges.

Helen was a crofter’s wife, and her mother a midwife, or howdie. Helen would have learned the skills of aiding women in childbirth as a matter of course. For centuries, women relied on the country midwife to help them. It would be the 18th century before any official medical training was available; Aberdonian surgeon, Dr David Skene was one of the first in this area to offer such training in the 1760s.

What Helen and Margaret also had in common was a knowledge of curses, according to the testimony of their neighbours. Gaining the reputation of witches, people were only too willing to blame them for their misfortunes.

It would seem that the Strachan family attracted trouble, as poor Bessie, who had married one of Helen’s sons, was cursed and suffered a terrible illness, alternating between being “roasit and brint up” with fever, and “as cauld as ice”. Her sickness began after Halloween, one John Ross testified. He further compounded the crime by saying Margaret had given Bessie poisoned milk which caused her to have a fit. Their other neighbour, John Chapman, claimed he had been enchanted in the same way after seeing Helen carrying out a ritual known as “yird and stane” while in “a devilish shape”. Chapman had challenged her, but she had only stared at him and did not reply. He was convinced that he had been smitten by the evil eye. By modern standards, the pair were probably both suffering from influenza.

Helen’s nearest neighbour at Findrack, George Forbes, claimed she had bewitched his cattle, causing them to run wild and fatally injure themselves. He also said that Helen had cast a spell on his horse which threw him and ultimately died long before its time. Forbes testified in person at Helen’s trial.

HELEN ROGIE AND MARGARET BANE
WITCHES OF LUMPHANAN

Andrew Nicol, a Lumphanan tailor, had accosted Helen and searched her bag, finding a leaden figure in the shape of a man, a type of “voodoo” doll perhaps? Nicol was lucky to survive this experience!

Saddest of all, poor Helen was condemned by her own mother, Margaret Bane, who told the court that they all took part in a “devilish dance” on Craiglich Hill with Satan himself in attendance. Craiglich and Craighlash were both associated with witches’ covens.



Lumphanan

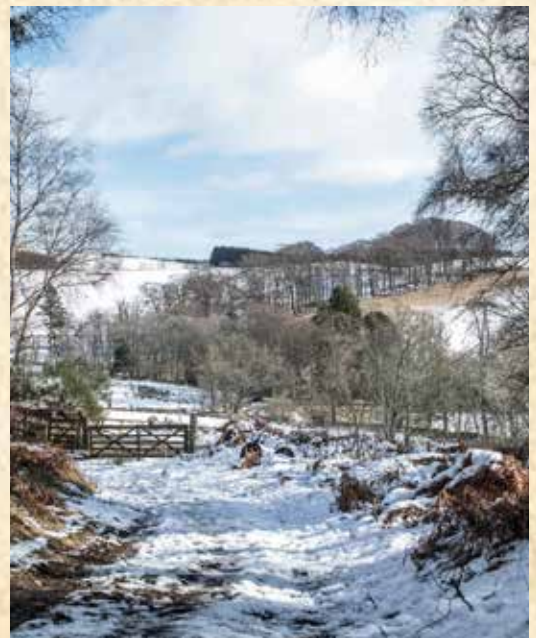
In Margaret’s case, it would seem that some of her midwifery clients blamed her for the deaths of their children, despite the fact that infant mortality was very high. She was not thanked for “predicting the birth of a child”, even though as an experienced midwife, Margaret would have been readily able to recognise the symptoms of pregnancy. Even attempts to ease a woman’s labour pains by apparently transferring them to someone else was believed to be evidence of her evil ways. There was no knowledge of psychosomatic pain back in the 16th century!

HELEN ROGIE AND MARGARET BANE
WITCHES OF LUMPHANAN

She too was seen carrying out the yird and stane ritual, which related to ownership of property, her accusers claiming she was stealing their land. Margaret was blamed for the death of a neighbour's daughter, as she had been seen to remove a peat from their house and put it in her own hearth.

Thus the “witches” of Lumphanan were condemned to death by their own actions. Both were executed in Aberdeen, Margaret on 25 March 1597, Helen, ten days later. The period 1596-97 was nicknamed “The Year of the Burnings” since 26 women were burned at the stake for witchcraft. The frenzy against anyone, male or female, thought to be in league with the Devil and capable of causing harm to others, had all started with King James VI's obsession. He was convinced that the North Berwick Coven, led by Agnes Sampson, had conspired to kill his new bride, Anne of Denmark, by raising a storm to wreck the ship on which she sailed to Scotland. The Church and State worked together to fight what they saw was the Devil in action on earth, serving only to divide communities, fuel superstition, and give people an excuse to settle scores with difficult neighbours by accusing them of witchcraft. In Scotland and Europe witches were burned, as they were equated with religious heretics, whereas in England, witchcraft carried the sentence of hanging.

By the middle of the 17th century, those accused of witchcraft were merely fined and banished or had their magical books and articles burned by the civic executioner. However, the Witchcraft Act was law across Britain right up to 1951 when it was replaced by the Fraudulent Mediums Act. The last “witch” convicted until the old act was Helen Duncan, originally from Perthshire. She was imprisoned for nine days after a seance in Portsmouth during which she had revealed the fate of a British battleship during the Second World War before the Ministry of Defence had released the details. The information had apparently come from the spirit of a young sailor who had drowned aboard.



Lumphanan

Craiglich is a picturesque hillwalk today, and Findrack House, dating from the 17th century, marks the site of the estate between Lumphanan and Tornaveen where she lived.

THE LAIRD OF MORPHIE AND THE WATER KELPIE

John Graham of Morphie was a proud man; he was kin to the great Marquis of Montrose and decided he should have a grand house to reflect his social status. Morphie lies near St Cyrus, the border between Kincardineshire and Forfarshire. All that remains today is a farmhouse called Morphie, all because the laird himself tangled with a water kelpie.

A kelpie or Each-Uisge is a water spirit capable of assuming different forms, sometimes a tall, dark, handsome man, at others, a beautiful black horse. In the latter form, the kelpie would entice people to climb on his back, whereupon he would instantly dive into the nearest river or loch and drown them, feasting on their remains underwater. Kelpies were supernaturally strong creatures and the Laird of Morphie knew of a kelpie who lived at Ponnage Pool, a salmon pool in the North Esk river, near Marykirk. He thought that if he could somehow capture the kelpie, he could force him to build his new mansion. So Morphie went to visit a local witch to ask how he might achieve this.

“Ah, the water kelpie has one weakness, if you can cut off his bridle with cauld iron, and keep it from him, then he will be in your power till he regains it,” the old woman explained. “Ye maun creep up behind him and cut the bridle with one blow. He will pursue ye, but if ye protect your hame with rowan boughs, then he cannot cross yer threshold. Hide that bridle for as lang as ye would mak him your servant.”

Morphie gave the woman some silver coins and left, returning to his wife to tell her the news. “So, you must gather all the rowan branches you can and fix them above every door and window, but leave a window open at the rear of the house for me to climb into. The kelpie will hopefully tire himself out and then I will have control of him!” His wife was reluctant to have any dealings with such an uncanny beast, but she knew he had his heart set on a grand house and was too mean to pay stonemasons to do the job.

Next day, Morphie rode down to Ponnage Pool with his sharpest dagger which had a heavy hilt. He walked quietly to the water’s edge, leaving his horse out of sight. He could see the kelpie, standing as dozing horses do, with one back leg bent. Morphie approached as silently as he could, then hit kelpie hard above his right eye with the hilt of the dagger. Kelpie made a furious

THE LAIRD OF MORPHIE AND THE WATER KELPIE

whinnying noise and stumbled, giving Morphie enough time to slash the bridle in half, and pull it away from Kelpie's head.

“Ye evil man, what mean ye by this?” Kelpie screamed in human words. “You are my servant now, Kelpie, and I command you to come with me!” Morphie stated as the beautiful black horse with a coat as dark as night regained his footing.



Image by kind permission of Sarah Birdsong

The Kelpie

“I’ll kill ye first!” Kelpie roared as Morphie whistled for his own beast and mounted with all speed. He rode back home with Kelpie fast on his heels. To his relief, he could see the house was festooned with rowan branches at every possible entrance and bound with red thread to complete the protective charm. Morphie leapt from his horse and sent it running for the stable as he charged around the back and climbed in the lower window his wife had left open for him.

THE LAIRD OF MORPHIE AND THE WATER KELPIE

Kelpie arrived a moment later, pawing and snorting with rage, seeing he was thwarted by the rowan. He rushed round and round the house until eventually he collapsed. Over the next few weeks, the laird had him pulling huge granite boulders, lifting them into place, and miraculously creating Morphie's new mansion. Kelpie was exhausted; at the end of every day he begged Morphie to return his bridle, promising he would leave him alone, but the laird was unmoved.

Kelpie's shiny coat was soon dirty and matted. He lost weight, the laird only feeding him one bag of oats a day. He was as cruelly treated as any old farm cuddy and became angrier by the minute, vowing to have revenge. Eventually the mansion with its stately castellated walls was finished, and Morphie was as good as his word, returning the bridle to the kelpie. He made sure he was indoors and threw the repaired bridle out of the window. Kelpie seized it with his teeth and cast it up in the air, where it fell lightly back on his head. He turned and issued this frightening curse:

Sair back an sair banes,
Carryin the laird o Morphie's stanes!
But the laird o Morphie'll never thrive,
As lang as Kelpie is alive!

Morphie dismissed the curse, knowing he was protected with fresh rowan branches around his new house. But soon it was reported around the district that any who spotted the kelpie at Ponnage Pool heard him muttering the same curse, over and over.

The laird's life was thereafter blighted with sickness and trouble. His wife left him, taking their children with her. The house began to crumble, till eventually it collapsed, taking Morphie with it. Folk said this was all the kelpie's doing, and only the line of his daughter survived, the lands of Morphie ultimately landing in the hands of his distant kinsman who was descended from Barclay of Mathers.

Kelpies are very common in Scottish and Irish mythology, and there are many tales in Aberdeenshire concerning them. The Ponnage Pool Kelpie was referenced in the poetry of two local authors separated by over a hundred and fifty years, George Beattie of St Cyrus, writing in 1815, and Helen Burness Cruickshank of Hillside, Angus, in 1968. Helen's poetry collection published that year was entitled *The Ponnage Pool*.

THE LAIRD OF MORPHIE
AND THE WATER KELPIE

The Kelpies is the name for the twin horse head sculpture by Andy Scott, a huge landmark on the river near Falkirk, inspired by the legend, but also modelled on two Clydesdale horses who lived at the Belwade World Horse Welfare Centre near Aboyne.

Beware any strange large black horses by rivers, they may look attractive, but they may be a water kelpie!

FORVIE AND THE DEVILISH PRIEST

“No human habitation could be seen,” wrote an anonymous correspondent to the Aberdeen Magazine in 1832. They were describing the vast dunes of what is now Forvie National Nature Reserve, home to a myriad of wildlife. Yet the ghosts of Forvie’s past as a coastal village are to be found among the tall grasses and sandy soil. The walls of the chapel, once dedicated to St Adomnan, biographer of Columba, still remain in splendid isolation above the North Sea. But what caused the community to abandon their homes and place of worship?

Tales abound of a mighty storm which decimated the dunes and swamped the village; a Protestant preacher, Rev Masson, declared that Forvie’s inhabitants had been ignorant Papists punished by a reforming deity. By far the most frightening story is that which was discovered by a local wildlife ranger. A long-forgotten epic poem recites the fate of Forvie, once a thriving community from the Neolithic period to the 15th century.

The old priest had died, and the parishioners of Forvie were keen to meet his replacement. The new priest was a tall, youthful individual with a shorn head. Some speculated he had recently left a monastery. He surprised them by keeping himself to himself and only being seen at mass and confession. He did not visit the sick, he did not attend village festivities, he seemed to take his role very seriously, remaining aloof from the people.

But one by one, the villagers discovered all was not right with the new priest. As they entered the confessional, villagers found the priest laughing at their sins and telling them that their neighbours had done far worse. The one thing that the old priest had warned his congregation was to stop tale-bearing, as they would surely reap whatever dissention they sowed. Every secret, every loathsome sin and scandal that was poured out to the new priest was soon whispered abroad, causing old grudges and jealousies to be rekindled, sending the community into a frenzy of ill-temper.

FORVIE AND THE DEVILISH PRIEST

And then the girls started to go missing. The first was a young woman, who had just been about to marry her sweetheart. Her fiancé was devastated, especially when the rumours flew that she had left him for someone else. Then it was the baker's daughter, a kindly lassie who was still a scholar, but helped her aged father in his business. He refuted any suggestion that she had run away because she was with child. Then another, and another, and another until seven unmarried virgins had vanished into thin air. The priest would not speak out, he merely fuelled further rumours.



Forvie Nature Reserve

A storm blew up, casting a bitter north wind down from the Arctic, causing the sand to billow around the village. The baker and his brother, the local blacksmith, had continued to search for their loved one; that night they walked along the beach, hoping to find any caves or hollows the storm may have uncovered. Reaching the land just below the chapel, the baker could see the gaping mouth of a cave which he had never noticed before. His brother held up a lantern and they went in, the waves whipping around their feet. To their surprise, the very back of the cave was lit by flaming torches which revealed a symbol painted on the granite walls, a pentagram, "The devil's work!" cried the blacksmith. Down below the evil mark was a stone altar, and on it, bound in chains, was the baker's daughter. Father and uncle screamed in horror and flung their arms around her body. This roused the poor child and she wept piteously. "Oh Faither, ye found me! Thank the angels in heaven, help me!" she cried.

“Aye, we shall! I’ll get some tools and free ye, dearie,” her uncle assured, running out and scrambling up the bank.

“What happened tae ye, ma wee bairn?” the baker asked.

“It wis the new priest! He’s nae a priest at aa, he’s the De’il incarnate! I wis walking by the chapel een nicht and he beckoned me in, asked me aa about masel, and wis I ever kent to ony man, which I said I wisna, I kept masel clean and awa fae hairm!” the girl began to explain.

“Then he gave me this hot milk and I felt affa sleepy. I must hae swooned, syne I woke up doon here. Then I saw the ither lassies, look! It’s affa!” She pointed to the dark corners and the baker held up the torch to reveal the emaciated, dead bodies of the other six missing girls. They looked as if they had been drained of everything that made them human.

“This is evil! We canna allow him tae continue, we maun get oor neighbours together!” the baker exclaimed.

Once the blacksmith had returned and broken the heavy chains imprisoning his niece, he and his brother carried her back to the forge. Word was sent by the blacksmith’s apprentice and soon all the adults of the village were crowding into the blacksmith’s abode. When they saw the baker’s daughter with her pale, drawn face and heard her awful testimony, they began to cry and scream in rage.

“We must stop this evil, he wisna richt, he spoilt the sanctity o the confessional, he’s turned us aa agin’ the ither! Oh, may the Lord forgive us for oor sinful wyes!” the shoemaker exclaimed.

“We’ll gaun to the chapel now, and demand he leave us!” another added.

“My freens, we maun be careful, if this chiel is the De’il, then we hae to protect oorsels. Lang syne, the auld folk believed that cauld iron protected fae evil and witchcraft, well, aa you menfolk, tak tools o iron fae my workshop and mak the sign o a cross wi them. Noo let us meet wi this vile beast and cast him oot o Forvie, then we start afresh, cleanse ourselves from oor wicked wyes!” the blacksmith ordered.

FORVIE AND THE DEVILISH PRIEST

The women stayed with the baker's daughter, attempting to comfort her, while the men walked resolutely to the chapel and surrounded it. They demanded the priest show himself, seeing all the candles and lanterns inside were lit. Both doors were locked, so they smashed their way in, but found the church empty and a freezing cold draught blowing up the aisle. The men found the harsh air was coming from an open trapdoor behind the altar. There were stairs which the blacksmith guessed led to the cave where his niece and the other girls had been held captive.



Forvie Nature Reserve

Then there was a roar of triumph from outside. The men ran out to see the demonic priest standing atop a hill. “So, men of Forvie, you learned my true identity at last! Yet you were happy to listen to gossip and spread stories about your fellow villagers for many a day! You even believed ill of those poor virgins which have given me sustenance! Well, for your sins, you will all face destruction!” he howled in delight. He held his arms aloft and roared into the storm: “Let naught be found in Forvie’s glebes, but thistle, bent and sand! Let not a life be spared!” The wind skirled like an uncanny monster, whipping up the sea, sending sand whirling like a thousand dervishes, blinding the men as they ran to try and seize their enemy.



Forvie Nature Reserve

The storm raged all night and the next day. By the time it had passed by, Forvie was shrouded in sand. Not one house had escaped. Only the tip of the chapel roof was visible. The devil had got his due.

But, how did the sand really gobble up a whole village? The truth is sadly far more mundane than the actions of the devil. Meteorological records show that in August 1413 a combination of extreme tides and high winds blew the sands from the beach strand at Forvie inland, creating a hundred-foot high dune which smothered the village. For a millennium the dunes had been stable, but by the end of the 1400s, the sand had moved almost 1,500 feet inland, rendering the area completely inhospitable. Thus, the author of Forvie's fate was not the devil, but Nature at its fiercest.

THE DEVIL'S STANE AND THE PRIEST OF KEMNAY

The Devil seemed to have a particular dislike for the churchmen of the North-East. Many are the tales of his attempts to frustrate their supplications against his evil ways, none more so than the priest of Kemnay.

Greystones Road, a relatively new street in Kemnay village, gives a little clue to the mysterious tale recorded in verse by Aberdeen poet and journalist, William Cadenhead. In 1871, the Royal Society of Edinburgh, however, dismissed the story as a legend which attempted to explain how a 250-ton granite boulder could appear in a field seven miles from stones of the same type. No such granite was to be found in Kemnay, but, the RSE members speculated, some 'natural agency', such as a glacier, could have brought the boulder to rest in the field near the old kirk.

Cadenhead sets the scene by describing the various 'spiritual champions' in the district, Culdee monks from Monymusk, Logie-Durno and the bishop of Fetternear, but none compare with Kemnay's priest for 'lifting the downcast heart, for helping the lowly poor'. The poet continues by saying:

On a' the bonnie banks o' Don
There wasnae ane haly man
Like him wha knelt in Kemnay kirk
At the shrine o' our Ladie Anne

Saint Anne was the mother of the Virgin Mary; Kemnay's present Episcopal Church is dedicated to her, yet it was the site of the present kirk where this devout priest was thought to have worshipped.

The Devil visits Bennachie - the latter described in terrible terms as in olden time 'ane o the ports o' the byrnand pit', that is, a gateway to hell, which spewed fire at night - and is sent into a flaming rage by the Kemnay priest's good deeds. Auld Hornie, Auld Cloven Hoddie, the Earl of Hell, he is known by various names in an attempt to lessen the terror of his infernal nature. He cannot bear to see the servants of his great Enemy, the Almighty God, prosper. From Bennachie's rocky heights, the Devil ranges back and forth, wondering how he can best rid himself of the priest.

THE DEVIL'S STANE AND THE PRIEST OF KEMNAY

The priest of Kemnay was indeed a devout servant of the church and his community. That day was feast of St Barnabas, fellow missionary of the Apostle Paul, and kinsman to gospel author, John Mark; mass was being held in the church. The priest sensed that evil was afoot and led the congregation's prayers. "With the aid of the blessed Anne and all the saints of heaven, may Satan be forever bound to his dark and fiery lair!" his voice carried across the sacred space as outside the sky darkened.

The organist began to play, and the choir sang the words of the liturgy, driving the Devil into a paroxysm of rage up on the hill. He cast around for a weapon, seeing only the bald grey rocks which surrounded the Mither Tap of Bennachie. But ah, he saw a vast granite boulder, striated with millennia of volcanic activity, sunk deep in the side of the hill. Grabbing the rock, he hoisted it above his head with supernatural strength and threw it with a curse towards the little church of Saint Anne.



Gray Stane, Kemnay

The sky had grown so dark now that the locals fled the church, leaving the priest on his own. He knelt before the altar and prayed all the more for deliverance from evil as the massive rock blotted out the sky above. Saint Anne and the angels heard his pleas and were roused to address the Devil's machinations. The heavenly spirits arrived just in time to divert the boulder in mid-air, so that it dropped harmlessly in the glebe lands. The people had witnessed the miraculous deliverance of their church and spiritual father, and while they had been blind to the presence of the angels, they had seen the boulder hover for a moment and change direction!

THE DEVIL'S STANE AND THE PRIEST OF KEMNAY

Never again would they fear the Devil, knowing their priest was favoured by heaven after this amazing incident. Thereafter, the boulder never moved, half-buried in the earth. It was named the Devil's Stane thereafter and no-one dared approach it.

Centuries later, when superstitious fears had abated, farmers worked the land around the boulder. When the granite quarries were opened on Paradise Hill, such rocks could be blasted apart by dynamite, and no-one paid any attention to this Ice Age survivor. The present-day village grew up around the quarries, one of which still operates today, though on a smaller scale.

In the 21st century, the Devil's Stane was entirely tamed, being surrounded by modern housing. The residents of Greystones Road today are probably unaware that no less than Satan himself was responsible for the boulder's presence, or at least, prefer to believe the Royal Society of Edinburgh's explanation that it arrived through glacial activity.



Gray Stane, Kemnay

JOCK THE GIANT OF BENNACHIE

“But Bennachie! Faith, yon's the hill/ Rugs at the hairt when ye're awa!” So wrote Alford-born poet, Charles Murray. Aberdeenshire's favourite hill stands at just over 1,700 feet and is a recognisable landmark with its hillfort dating from the Pictish period (200-900AD). Northeast of the main peak, Oxen Craig, is Craigshannoch; the 900 feet between it and two small tors is known as Little John's Length, but this John, or Jock, like the friend of Robin Hood, was a giant, and this was his bed. Jock o' Bennachie was one of the ancient inhabitants of Aberdeenshire who had retreated to the top of the hill when new tribes were moving in. But Jock was not alone, there were other giants living on the hills of Donside, including his great rival in love, Jock o'Noth, who lived on Tap o'Noth, the hill above the village of Rhynie, once the home of kings. Both Jocks competed for the hand of Lady Anne, a beautiful giantess who also lived locally.



Bennachie

Jock heard gossip that Anne and Jock o'Noth were flirting together up his hill, so to the top of Bennachie our Jock climbs to get a look, his eyesight being like a hawk's. To his horror, the rumour was true! There they were, cuddling up together on the hillside. Jock flew into a rage and picked up a huge boulder from Bennachie, throwing it with all his might towards Tap o'Noth. Jock o'Noth just saw the stone in time and deflected it with his foot, which sprung the missile back the way it had come, knocking a chunk out of the Mither Tap. Jock o'Bennachie was determined and flung another stone, just as Jock o'Noth raised up a boulder of his own. Just as he did, Anne pulled at his arm, and begged him to stop fighting. Jock shifted his position to reply, but in so doing, put her right in the path of the other flying rock, which crushed her to death against the hillside. Jock o'Bennachie could see what he had done and was horrified! He'd killed his beloved! He fled down the hill, fully expecting Jock o'Noth to come after him, but even by nightfall he saw and heard no-one.

JOCK THE GIANT OF BENNACHIE

Jock wept for Lady Anne as he settled in the woods. He cried himself to sleep. Some time later, he was woken with the sound of a soft, familiar voice. To his huge surprise, there was Anne, in her beautiful white gown with flowers in her golden hair. “Jock, where have you been? I’ve been looking for ye everywhere!” she soothed.

“Oh me, my quine, thocht I’d killed ye! I sweir saw the rock hit ye!” he gasped. “Oh come here, my bonnie darling!” Anne wrapped her arms around him and began to kiss his lips with such fervour that Jock felt his cheeks redden. He closed his eyes, thinking that today had been a terrible nightmare.



Bennachie from East Aquhorthies Stone Circle

Suddenly, Jock opened his eyes and realised he was alone. He looked around and saw a shaft of light suddenly disappearing; there was a tall, ugly, angry fairy woman pulling shut a massive wooden door. “Aye Jock, ye did kill the peer quine, and ye’ll bide here till somebody braks my spell!” Jock screamed in protest, running towards the light, but too late, as the door banged behind the fairy woman. He thumped at it, kicked, shouted and swore oaths at it, but the door did not move. He was under a spell and there was nothing he could do about it.

The fairy put her story about, warning all that the whole country would suffer due to Jock’s crime. Her curse ran thus: Scotland will never be rich, be rich/
Till they find the keys of Bennachie/ They shall be found by a wife's ae son, wi
ae e'e,/ Aneath a juniper tree! It meant that Jock could only be freed by a one-eyed boy who was an only son, the keys to the hill’s secret dungeon to be found under a juniper tree. So far, Jock has not been released.



Bennachie from East Aquhorthies Stone Circle

Jock o'Bennachie's stone-throwing antics are the explanation for Bennachie's rugged outline. Alexander Inkson McConnachie was responsible for putting the legend into print; Jock's story appears in his 1890 book, *Bennachie*, which was published in Aberdeen. He attributes the fairy's curse to Thomas the Rhymer, Scotland's medieval seer. Jock's story came from two poems or ballads which tell of his accidental murder of Anne and Jock o'Noth, and the visitation from the fairy in the guise of Lady Anne. McConnachie was clearly inspired by oral legend, which he shaped into poetry which suited the romantic appetites of his Victorian audience. Jock's story is part of a greater worldwide tradition of giant tales, from as far afield as Iraq, in the ancient epic, *Gilgamesh*, where King Izdubar is able to defeat the giant ogre, Khumbaba; to nearby Ulster, where the Giant's Causeway was built by Irish hero, Fionn MacCumhaill, only to be used by his Scots rival, Benadonner to meet him for a fight, which he is saved from by the clever actions of his wife, Oona.

Bennachie is fairly easy to climb by various routes and has a visitor centre near Pitcaple. Information can be found on the Baillies of Bennachie web site. The Baillies are a long-standing community group who act as guardians for the hill and the woods around the base.

TWICE BURIED MARY

It had been the wedding of the year; the tenants were delighted for James Elphinstone, Laird of Logie, finally marrying his sweetheart, Mary. Her fabulous lace and silk gown was like nothing that had ever been seen in Inverurie, and that diamond engagement ring! It was a huge solitaire which sparkled fiercely like a star in the heavens. Some folk said the gem had come all the way from the Barents' Sea in Russia.

Mary Elphinstone was just as happy to be the laird's wife. She and James had loved each other since childhood. The week after the honeymoon, however, Mary began to feel faint and sickly. She took to her bed, causing James to fuss and have the housemaids running back and forth with hot drinks and extra blankets for her bed. It was when she stopped eating at all and couldn't be roused that James sent for the family physician. The doctor later exited Mary's bedroom with a grim face. "I'm afraid there's nothing to be done, sir, your wife is dead."

James is hysterical. Dead? How can his beloved Mary be dead? They'd been married less than a month, she was a young, healthy woman, how could she be robbed of life so soon? But sure enough, Mary was pale and cold, a beautiful corpse. James had her dressed in her wedding gown and wrapped in a shroud. Word got out that she was to be buried with that diamond ring, which interested some local graverobbers, always on the look out for fresh corpses to sell to the local anatomy schools at Kings and Marischal Colleges in Aberdeen. Though it was a crime to steal the property of the dead, corpses themselves had no legal status, thus the shortage of cadavers for the medical students was often addressed by digging up a newly-dead person. A fresh cadaver was worth a month's wages, and if the two likely lads could pawn the ring too, they'd be in the money.

Having watched the funeral from afar, James and his younger friend Jock went to the kirkyard in the dead of night, leaving their cart by the entrance. It was Jock who had heard the gossip from a maidservant at Logie House, thus he knew the treasure which lay within. After several cold hours carefully digging out turf and earth, they reached the wooden coffin, then with a crowbar, snapped open the top third of the lid.

Once the mortcloth was unwrapped, they saw Mary, her hands crossed over her breast, the ring sparkling in their lantern light. "Oh, fit a bonny gem," exclaimed Jamesy. "Haud the licht or I get it aff her finger!"

"Me haud the licht? Fa's the senior partner here?" Jock grumphed.

"Me! Am aulder than thee, now, wheest!" Jamesy snapped and pulled at the ring. He pulled and pulled to no avail, it was stuck completely.

"Fit are ye playin at?" Jock demanded.

"Och, it's stuck on her finger, I'd need some butter or something to ease it aff!" Jamesy replied.

"Are you feel? Far wid we get butter in a graveyard in the middle o the night! Haud the licht, I'll deal wi it!" Jock retorted, thrusting the lantern into Jamesy's hand and took out his pocketknife.

"Fit are ye gaun tae dae?" Jamesy asked in horror.

"Cut her finger aff, she's deid, she's nae gaun to feel it!" Jock began to slice the skin under the ring.

The moment the blood began to flow, both graverobbers got the fright of their lives as the "corpse" sat up screaming. They fled, leaving the lantern on the ground. Mary looked around her and felt icy cold. "James, James, where are you? Where am I?" she cried, her head aching.

"Oh, so you're nae a corpse then?" It was Jamesy, having hidden behind a headstone.

"What? Who are you?" Mary gasped, seeing the man as he approached her. Jamesy grabbed the lantern and shone it in her face.

"Oh, nobody, jist a humble gravedigger. So why are you in a coffin then, if you're nae deid?" he asked with half a smile.

“Coffin?” Mary scrambled to her feet and fell forward into Jamesy’s arms.

“Now, now, lassie, I’ve got you. Some glaikit doctor thocht ye were deid. They buried ye this mornin,” he explained.

“Oh! All I remember is feeling so terribly tired, and sick, and the light was too bright! I must get home, I can’t stay here!” Mary gasped, then she saw her bloodied hand under the lantern light. “My hand? My finger, I’m bleeding! You! You’re one of those Resurrectionists! You were going to steal my ring and sell me to the surgeons! For shame!” she shrieked and slapped Jamesy’s cheek, causing him to reel backwards.

“Oww! Dinna blame me! We didna ken you were jist sick! Fit div ye expect me tae dae, you’re the wife o a laird, I’m a poor cottar!” Jamesy grumbled.

“Indeed! I am Mrs Mary Elphinstone, and my husband James is known to the Sheriff of Aberdeen, who will deal severely with you!” Mary retorted.

“Huh, it’s your man’s ain servant that should be deal wi, she’s the een that telt us about the diamond! Aa the wye fae Russia she said! Worth a fortune!” Jamesy exclaimed.

“What? What’s her name?”

“Janet, Janet Pirie, her uncle’s the sacrist at Marischal College, George Pirie, it wis him that wis gaun to buy the... your body!” Jamesy confessed.

“Janet! The jealous little madam! Well, she shall not stay a moment longer under our roof. And if you want to avoid a meeting with the Sheriff, you will get me home to Logie House!” Mary demanded. Jock took off his big woollen overcoat and placed it around her shoulders.

“I’m heartily sorry, lassie, I didna ken! Please, I’ll drive ye tae Logie, my cairt is jist outside the gates, that is if Jock hisna run aff wi it!” Jamesy explained.



Inverurie Kirkyard

Mary was duly taken back to Logie where the family were in mourning. She banged on the door, crying out her husband's name. Inside, the distraught laird exclaimed: "Oh! If I believed in spirits, I would have said that was the voice of my beloved wife calling me!" Kitty, Elphinstone's kitchen maid, a poor, but wise young girl, knew her mistress' voice at once, and ran to the door, flinging it wide to find Mary standing in her gown, hopped in Jamesy's coat.

"Oh Mistress! I kent it wis you! You werena deid at all! Yon feel doctor, I kent! Come in oot o the cauld!" little Kitty cried with delight, ushering her in. James was now standing at the top of the stair on the landing and saw them. "Mary? What?" he gaped at her as she ran up the steps to meet him.

"Yes! James, it's me! I wasn't dead at all!" she laughed. James promptly fainted as she flung her arms around him. "Oh, Kitty, he's fainted, silly James!" The uproar brought the rest of the household who cheered and cried in alternate measure at the supernatural deliverance of their dear Mary.

TWICE BURIED MARY

The rest of James and Mary's life together was uneventful; they lived to a ripe old age, and died within days of each other, having never been out of each other's company since that dreadful incident. The inscription on the headstone reminded everyone of it, Mary Elphinstone, Twice Buried.

This story, although most likely to be fictional, represents the real fears that people had in the late 18th and early 19th centuries of being buried alive, or having a loved one's corpse stolen from the graveyard to be sold to the anatomy schools.

In Aberdeenshire, students themselves from Kings and Marischal Colleges often went out themselves to "lift" a "subject". The more well-off students and the professors could often afford to pay a professional graverobber to do the work for them. Those operating in the countryside often targeted the Travelling people, as they had no fixed abode or legal status, nobody was concerned when they went missing. Stories abound within the Stewart and Robertson families of how their ancestors were murdered by the "Burkers", the nickname taken from Burke and Hare, the Edinburgh serial killers who supplied surgeon Robert Knox. Some are recorded in the School of Scottish Studies' Tobar an Dulchais online database.



Inverurie Kirkyard



Inverurie Kirkyard

“Twice-Buried Mary” has variants found across Scotland and Ireland; the Irish tale concerns a Marjorie McCall, whose husband claims he will not believe his wife has returned from the dead until his horses appear at the upper window. A servant takes the horses upstairs and then directs his attention as Marjorie stands freezing on the doorstep.

Returning to Mary Elphinstone, who is associated with Inverurie and sometimes Kintore, is supposed to be buried for a second time in the same grave at either one of these cemeteries. Visitors to the grave are warned they may hear knocking coming from below the ground, as Mary may still not be dead! The prosaic explanation is that an underground stream runs through a pipe in the cemetery, and it is the water knocking against the leaden tube that makes the knocking sound. But one should never let the truth get in the way of a good story!

DAVID BARCLAY

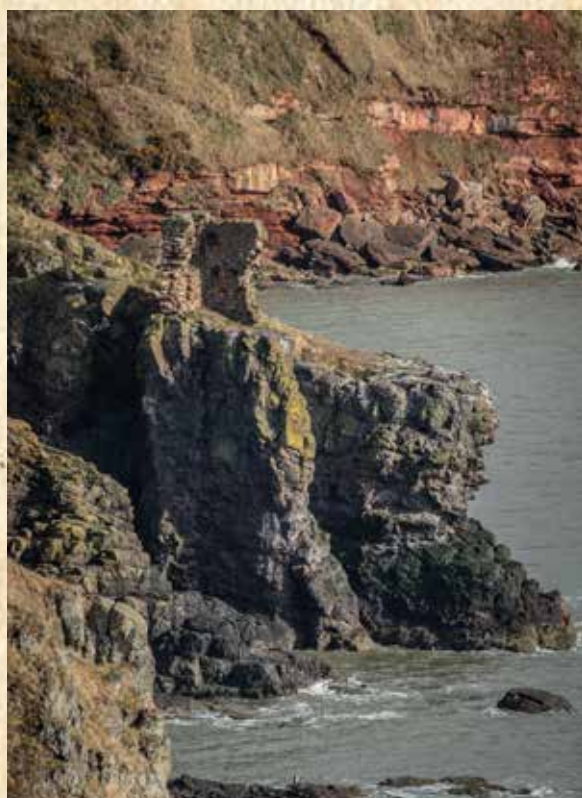
THE CANNIBAL LAIRD AND THE SHERIFF OF THE MEARNS

The Kaim of Mathers is a curious ruin sitting atop treacherous cliffs on the Kincardineshire coast within sight of St Cyrus to the south and Johnshaven to the north. This fortress was reputedly built by David Barclay, the Laird of Mathers to escape the wrath of James II (or some versions say James I) after Barclay's involvement in the murder of Sheriff John Melville. The nature of the killing led to Barclay's gruesome soubriquet, The Cannibal Laird.

Let us go back to James's court and witness a tense scene between him and his noblemen, Barclay of Mathers, Arbuthnott, Pitarrow and Halkerton. The lairds were lamenting the heavy-handed conduct of Melville, Sheriff of the Mearns, accusing him of impropriety with their womenfolk, interfering in their business and generally causing a nuisance.

The king despaired of hearing this chatter, and suddenly exclaimed: "No sorrow gin the sheriff wis sodden and supped in broo!" "As ye command, sire," Barclay grinned. James had given him carte blanche to do away with their unpleasant sheriff. The others looked at him, wondering what nefarious plan was hatching in Barclay's mind.

Days later, Sheriff John Melville was invited by the lairds to a hunting party on the hill of Gavrock, which lay within his jurisdiction, just north of Morpie. "After our hunt, my servants have prepared a cauldron for our... prey," Barclay smiled wickedly. "It's in a fine sheltered howe, do join us, dear Melville!"



Kaim of Mathers

DAVID BARCLAY
THE CANNIBAL LAIRD AND THE SHERIFF OF THE MEARNS

There was not a single deer to be found; Melville declared he had to go home before dark as his wife was expecting him. "Let us go to sup, do stay!" Barclay declared. With the horses tethered after they reached the little glen, the lairds seemed to hang back as Melville walked towards a huge iron cooking cauldron full of boiling water, under which a fire was merrily blazing, attended by a servant. Melville locked gazes with the boy, wondering what they would have to eat since they had caught no meat.



Kaim of Mathers

Suddenly, the sheriff felt a massive blow to the back of the head. Barclay had struck him with the hilt of his sword. They then stripped his unconscious body, bound his wrists and ankles and dropped him into the cauldron, the heat waking him up instantly. He screamed in terror, as the lairds watched, fascinated. The servant had been paid handsomely to keep his mouth shut and stoke the fire. The boiling water slowly turned Melville's skin lobster red, searing the breath from his lungs. "We are doing the king's bidding, Sheriff, he said himself, no sorrow gin the sheriff were sodden and supped in broo!" Melville swore and cursed with his dying breath that Barclay would never be at peace for his foul act of murder.

Now entirely suffocated, Melville boiled alive in the cauldron. The servant boy averted his eyes, trying to suppress the urge to retch at the smell of boiling flesh. Barclay's friends and kinsmen realised the enormity of their actions when he produced a horn spoon for each of them. "Now, we must carry out our royal master's command to the letter, we will sup the broo of our sheriff!" he instructed with a malevolent smirk.

They reluctantly took the spoons, unwilling to be the first to partake of this human soup. Barclay was angry with them: "Come, cousins, you all agreed to this!" He held his spoon aloft and dipped it into the bubbling cauldron which was now filled with a dubious brown brew composed of Melville's melting flesh. He supped with relish, much to the distaste of his kinsmen. "Exquisite, never did I think that the flesh of man could make such... meaty broo!" he laughed.

Barclay drew his sword and motioned the men to follow suit, which they did, Arbuthnott particularly screwing up his eyes as the liquid slid down his throat. He threw down the spoon. "Barclay, I was willing to join a murder plot, Melville deserved no less, but this? This is monstrous! I will not stay another minute!" He fled, Barclay shouting that he was a coward.

Once word got to King James, most of the conspirators had gone into hiding. Only Arbuthnott answered the royal summons. "My lord, I will own that we disposed of Sheriff Melville, but I claim sanctuary from punishment through my kinship with Lord Macduff, the Earl of Fife. There is a family agreement that anyone, within nine degrees of the earl can be pardoned of murder once they reach the earl's cross at Lindores. I am going there now, and I will pay a fine to my kinsman, the earl, who will, I'm sure, pass on the funds to the Sheriff's family," he explained.

James knew of the agreement and bid Arbuthnott leave at once. Barclay was the chief amongst the killers, but James understood it had been foolish of him to make the comment that they had deliberately interpreted as a command to take justice into their own hands. "Barclay shall ne'er have peace on land nor sea, woe betide he ever appears in my presence again!"

It is not recorded what happened to the other lairds, but Barclay is said to have had the Kaim constructed so he could dwell in a no-man's-land between land and sea.

The Sheriff's Cauldron or Kettle still exists today near Garvock Hill. The minister of Garvock parish, Rev John Charles, recorded the story as fact in the New Statistical Account of Scotland in 1836. He even claims that the Clan Arbuthnott retains the laird's document of pardon from the time, giving further credence to the gruesome tale. There is no mention in the previous account of 1792. David Barclay was a real person, in fact the first of the family to change the spelling of his name from that of his ancestor, Hugh de Berkeley. The latter had been granted the Mearns as his property by William the Lion, King of Scots (1165-1214). The land of Mathers came into the family in 1351 through marriage. The Kaim dates from that period, but historians speculate that it was merely a hunting lodge, ironic, considering hunting was the excuse to get Melville to Garvock!

Though care is advised, visitors can walk from the St Cyrus School carpark along a cliff path, part of the local nature reserve, to view the Kaim of Mathers, which continues to crumble into the sea from its precarious rocky stack.

FINELLA - KILLER AND ENCHANTRESS

DEN FINELLA, JOHNSHAVEN

Finella was the daughter of the Mormaer or Sheriff of Angus, she was married to the sheriff of the Mearns. Brought up in Kincardine Castle, which is now just a pile of moss-covered rubble, she was used to fine dining and entertainment. Her son also enjoyed the trappings of a noble youth, but unfortunately for his mother, a bit too much. He and his friends spoiled his grandfather's castle during a riotous feast and made off with some treasures. Understandably, the Sheriff of Angus reported his grandson to the King, as he was unable to control him. Finella was horrified when her son refused to appear before King Kenneth, and was then pursued to the south of the county and tracked to the woods of Dunsinane.

Kenneth was furious at this young man's defiance of his royal authority; he had enough trouble as it was keeping his own family in order, some of whom would happily usurp him from his throne, thus the boy was executed as a warning to others. When Finella learned of her son's fate, she vowed revenge, but outwardly appeared contrite.

A keen huntress herself, Finella invited Kenneth to hunt with hawk and dogs in the woods around Kincardine Castle. She boasted that they had some fine fat stags worthy of capture. Kenneth, thinking nothing amiss, accepted the offer and went with his most trusted soldiers to meet her.

"Come to my house, my king, I have a great wonder to show you, which was created in your honour," Finella soothed as the sun dropped below the horizon. She led Kenneth to a lavishly decorated room with a golden statue of a boy in the centre of the floor. The figure was holding a ruby-studded apple in its outstretched hand.

"What is this?" Kenneth asked.

"A treasure for you, my king, to demonstrate my loyalty. If you pick up the apple, something amazing will happen," Finella smiled knowingly

The king stretched out and lifted the bejewelled apple from the statue's hand. There was a sudden sound of whirring cogs and hundreds of tiny, sharp, metal barbs were fired from hidden orifices in the body of the statue. They pierced Kenneth in a shower of steel, cutting into his heart, his head, his eyes, causing him to collapse in a bloody heap. Choked by one of the arrows which had lodged in his throat, Kenneth could only moan in protest as he bled to death. Finella laughed bitterly: "You fool, did you really expect to escape my wrath after slaughtering my son for nothing more than high spirits? Now your kinsman Constantine will take the throne of Alba and my family will be restored to power in the Mearns!"

Kenneth stared at her in horror, his mouth trying to form the name of his son, Malcolm, whom he had already named as his successor. From dark corners in the room, Kenneth's cousin Constantine and his nephew Kenneth MacDubh appeared. They had provided the materials for the death-trap statute, only too happy to aid Finella, as Kenneth's death would benefit them the most.

"Leave his body to us, Lady Finella, we will dispose of it in the woods, a hunting accident, perhaps?" Constantine suggested.

"Do as you wish, doubtless young Malcolm will find out the truth soon enough," Finella said.

Her prediction came true, as one of Kenneth's soldiers spotted the two men carrying the body out of the castle, and, knowing his master had gone in to see Finella, guessed that he had come to some terrible end.

Malcolm arrived the next day at the head of an army, determined to arrest his father's murderess. Finella fled on horseback until she could go no further, having reached a rocky, birch-lined glen which lead down to the sea. She sent her horse away, took off her fine clothes and shoes, and ran like a young deer across the treetops, much to the surprise of the pursuing soldiers.

"She's a witch, my lord, she flies over the birds' nests like a hawk!" one man observed.

"Finella is no witch, she'll escape if she reaches the sea, get down there after her!" Malcolm ordered.

FINELLA - KILLER AND ENCHANTRESS
DEN FINELLA, JOHNSHAVEN

Finella's tenants had now gathered near the cliffs, praying that their lady escaped royal vengeance, themselves no great friends of Kenneth. The soldiers scrambled along the rocky banks of the glen and saw Finella reach the waterfall, some sixty feet above the outflow of the stream. She stood tall, her long hair trailing behind her, and then jumped...

The folk of the Mearns mourned Finella, saying she had jumped to her death as Malcolm's soldiers pursued her. But late at night in the soldiers' quarters at Dunfermline, the seat of the royal family, drunken whispers told a different story.

"She flew! I tell ye, she became a bird and flew off across the sea, Finella was a witch!" claimed one.

"No, she grew wings, from her bare shoulders, she jumped and flew off into the waves!" said another.

"Hush! If his lordship hears ye, ye'll be hanged jist like Finella's son was! Keep this quiet, as far as Malcolm is concerned, the Mormaer's wife died while evading justice. Just pray she doesn't come flying over our nest!" the sergeant hisses as the men mutter. But they know what they saw.



Den of Finella, St Cyrus

Finella – the background

The deep, tree-lined valley of Den Finella near Johnshaven in the ancient burgh of Kincardine leads to treacherous sea cliffs and rocks below the now vanished fishing hamlet of Miltonhaven. Locals know that Finella was a Pictish noblewoman, bent on revenge following the execution of her son by the 10th century King of Scots, Kenneth II. This epic tale dates back to 995AD, the year of Kenneth's death, coming to us via the 1526 History and Chronicles of Scotland, written by Hector Boece, the first principal of Kings College, Aberdeen.



Den of Finella, St Cyrus

19th century advocate, John Hill Burton, recorded Finella's murderous act in his history of Scotland in 1873, observing that Kenneth "asserted his authority where it had not been acknowledged before." In this period, rulers were chosen by election from the leading kin group, a system called "tanistry"; thus, there was no automatic succession from father to son, and conflict inevitably arose between the "tainists" or candidates for the throne. Kenneth's cousin, Constantine and his nephew, Kenneth McDubh, were determined that his own son, Malcolm, would not succeed directly. Indeed history bore out that both men reigned before Malcolm ever became King of Alba, the old name of Scotland from the 9th century onwards, ruled by the descendants of Kenneth MacAlpin, whose ancestors were from Ireland.

Could it be that Constantine and Kenneth MacDubh persuaded the distraught mother Finella to assuage her grief by aiding them in their desire to remove Kenneth II and his family from the throne of Alba? Finella's existence is so far only attested to by Boece, and his translator, John Bellenden, but the tale has embedded itself in the landscape, fleshing out earlier references that state Kenneth II was "killed by treachery".

Finella's deed has inspired modern songwriters and artists from the area. For instance, artist, Sheila MacFarlane, who lives at the nearby Tangleha' Cottages, describes how, after moving to the area, she was prompted to research Finella's story, and found similarities in Irish legends of enchantresses and witches who could shape-shift as Finella was said to have done. This resulted in two eight-foot linocut prints of Finella standing at the waterfall before jumping to her death, or miraculously, to freedom in the shape of a bird. A pair of the prints are now in possession of Aberdeen Art Gallery.

Local singers April Pressley and Rory Comerford wrote their own interpretations of Finella's adventure, both imitating traditional ballad style. April's song contains the refrain "There's many a soul has living told of how she saw Finella jump and die, ah but late at night the king's brave soldiers swear they saw me jump and fly!" Rory alludes directly to the lady's supernatural abilities in his title "Finella Wantin Wings".

Finella is perhaps a representation of the faction that stood against Kenneth, or even of the old indigenous Pictish clans who were ousted from power by his ancestors a century and a half previously, but she is also a powerful female figure credited with the assassination of an unpopular leader, and a heroine for the Mearns down to this day. Looking down into the jagged, birch-lined valley where she met her mysterious fate, we can well imagine Finella was either an enchantress who conjured up wings to escape the forces of Kenneth, or an athletic woman who escaped down through the trees to a waiting boat on the coast, never to return.

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