

COMING HOME TO SCOTT COUNTRY

1300 Bowhill, Selkirk

Tuesday 24 June 2014

1330

I bid you welcome one and all
To gather in this ducal hall
At sweet Bowhill of poet's fame
All proudly bearing his good name.

For Scotts you are and Scotts you stand
Here in the heart of your Scott land.
You have come home from far and near
To meet and mingle in good cheer.

You are welcome to this Borderland
Where Scotts once used an iron hand.
But as you see these hills and moors
When you go round them on your tours

You'll see this is a tranquil place
Where life is at a gentle pace.
So, ladies fair and gentle-men
We're glad to see you home again

So now before we begin lunch a quick GRACE

Each Scott who's gathered can be sure
That Bowhill food will spice their tour
So, Lord, this grace we humbly pray
To start us on this happy day

Chieftain Charlie and all the distinguished Scotts gathered here,

You have chosen to come home at a most interesting time in the history of the Scotts - with two ts.

Today marks the 700th anniversary of the Battle of Bannockburn which I have always regarded as the date from which to mark the start of the descent into lawlessness in the Scottish Borders from which the Scotts emerged as the most successful and the most powerful of the Border ruffians and in thirteen days we will reach the bi-centenary of the day when Sir Walter Scott's first novel Waverley was published on the 7th of July 1814.

I have the honour to be the Chairman of the Edinburgh Sir Walter Scott Club and up until a couple of years ago was the Convener, that is the equivalent of the Mayor, for nine years of Scottish Borders Council which is the local authority in the Scottish Borders and before that looked after all the Scott Country in the European Parliament for ten years. So although I am not a member of the Scott "clan", I can at least claim to know the Scott Country well and to enjoy the writings of the most famous Scott. I even thought that Randolph Scott was my favourite actor in cowboy films.

I shall start with today's seven hundredth anniversary of 1314. When King Robert the Bruce decided he would take on the English he was lucky. His predecessors had faced the English King Edward the First who was a tough customer. But Bruce faced King Edward the Second who was lazy, unreliable, extravagant and pleasure-seeking and had surrounded himself with the sort of friends who were no help to a King. He was not the man his father has been but when Bruce besieged Stirling Castle which was in English hands he finally stirred himself, gathered together the army he had disbanded and marched into Scotland to lift the siege.

Bruce chased him away at Bannockburn and then set about laying waste the country south of the border. But to do this his armies also ravaged the Scottish side of the border on their way past and on both sides no-one could settle down to live peacefully and invest in the future so they took to raiding and stealing.

Those of you who are from Australia had your bushrangers, those of you from America will be aware of the lawlessness of the wild west which lasted for some thirty years. Our lawlessness lasted ten times as long for three hundred years.

Into such a vacuum will always stride strong-minded men and women. Robert the Bruce was such a man in Scottish history and Borderers being no different to anyone else the world over quickly found strength in numbers and gathered in groups or gangs or clans or families, it does not matter what you call them, based on family names. Soon some families became more ruthless and more feared than others. The most prominent names among them were the Scotts, the Kerrs and the Elliots, the people who now head the great families but who then built their power by force, and could see no point in trying to settle to farming the land and building for the future.

They were not interested in pitched battles but in smash and grab raids and in spite of the misty-eyed romance which distance has lent them they were not romantic figures. We can not possibly judge them by the standards of the early twenty first century, but even by the mores of their day a lot of these people were pretty nasty and the worst of them were in Liddesdale.

As the old Border ballad had it

Of Liddesdale the common thieves
 So smartly steals now and reives
 That none may keep
 Horse, cow or sheep
 Nor yet dare sleep
 For their mischiefs.

Not everybody was a reiver but a great many were and of course after Bruce's death the border did not suddenly become a haven of peace and tranquillity. If anything it became worse. No-one could feel settled and no-one did.

And so for some three hundred years the border land continued to be a dangerous place with nightly violence and robbery somewhere along its length. Certainly on the Scottish side no-one dared build anything less than a strong tower to defend themselves so you will not find along the Scottish border a house built solely as a comfortable dwelling like this before 1610 and the same is almost true on the English side.

It is only fair to say that these thieves did have some redeeming features. As soldiers, the Border Reivers were considered among the finest light cavalry in Europe. After meeting the Bold Buccleuch, Queen Elizabeth is reported to have said that "with ten thousand such men, James the Sixth of Scotland could shake any throne in Europe." Reivers served as mercenaries, or were forced to serve in English and Scots armies in the Low Countries and in Ireland. Such service was often handed down as a penalty in lieu of that of death upon their families.

But there were always doubts about Borderers. They were badly-behaved in camp, frequently plundered for their own benefit instead of obeying orders, and there were always questions about how loyal they were.

At battles such as Ancrum Moor in 1545, they changed sides in mid-battle, to curry favour with the likely victors, and at the Battle of Pinkie Cleugh in 1547, one observer noticed that the Scottish and English borderers were talking to each other in the midst of battle, and when they were spotted they put on a show of fighting.

Some of the riding families relied on brutality but others were more skilled and subtle. On the Scottish side, easily the most successful were the Scotts and the Kerrs. In the West the Johnstons and the Grahams were constantly at each others throats as well as annoying the English and the Armstrongs in the west and the Elliots and the Nixons in the middle march were essentially the nastiest of the ruffians although there were plenty of others who would want to claim that title.

Among all of these border families the most powerful and most successful were the Scotts who were active both as reivers and officers of the law. Their territory was West Teviotdale, Ewesdale and the dreaded Liddesdale.

They are so much a part of frontier history, that the Scott name is synonymous with that period of lawless Border life and was often accompanied by such descriptions as 'the Bold Buccleuch', 'Flagellum Dei', and 'God's Curse'.

One famous tale is told that Mary Scott, who was known as the Flower of Yarrow and who married one of the most notorious Border raiders, Walter Scott of Harden, when the larder was bare, served her husband with a plate of spurs for his dinner, as a strong hint that if he wanted to eat he had to go out and get in fresh supplies by whatever means he chose. In this area that meant raiding over the Border into England and stealing it.

But the Scotts were not just forceful, they were intelligent and adept at changing to suit the times so that when the Crowns of Scotland and England were united in 1603 the Scotts saw the writing on the wall for the old raiding life and became respectable, immensely respectable, and here we are today in the dining room of the twenty first century descendant of those old ruffians now His Grace the Duke of Buccleuch. To this day these families retain a real pride in their ancestors. If you look at the Buccleuch coat of arms you will see in it two moons and a star which is a heraldic acknowledgement of the days when their ancestors rode by moonlight across the Border to raid and to steal.

Down the years the most famous of the Scotts and easily the most influential, has been Sir Walter Scott whose home at Abbotsford you will be seeing tomorrow.

After the last of his descendants who had been looking after Abbotsford died ten years ago, the very distinguished former headmaster of Eton College Sir Eric Anderson posed an audience at Abbotsford eight exam questions, as head masters will.

He asked those gathered

1. How did the rest of the world first become aware of Scotland?
2. Why do Scots abroad usually find themselves trusted and welcome?
3. Why do people think Highland scenery beautiful?
4. Who, other than William Shakespeare, has had 85 operas based on his works?
5. Why are some of us wearing tartan today?
6. Why does Scotland have a tourist industry?
7. Why do so many people, worldwide, read novels?
8. Who invented Scottish Baronial architecture?

Sir Eric went on "exams have got easier since you were at school and this one is no exception. It's the sort of exam that doesn't require a great deal of knowledge. It doesn't even require you to be able to write more than three words - as the correct answer to each of the questions is "Sir Walter Scott". To get an A you might need seven words. "Sir Walter Scott and the Waverley Novels."

Scott's thirty novels, his narrative poems like *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* and *The Lady of the Lake*, and his historical writings like *Tales of a Grandfather* for the first time brought Scotland to the attention of the whole world.

Walter Scott was the most influential Scotsman of any age. There is some competition for that title Robert the Bruce, Adam Smith, Robert Burns, Thomas Telford and a few others but Scott can see them off quite easily.

In 1800 Scotland was almost unknown except to the people who lived there.

One hardy English visitor writing of his travels described the highlands as desolate and hideous and, "most disagreeable of all when the heath is in bloom". It was entirely because of *The Lady of the Lake*, *Waverley* and *Rob Roy*, that the heather hills of the highlands changed overnight into a wild, desirable landscape of extreme beauty and the Highlanders who lived there instead of being considered as squalid peasants became noble savages with an enviable code of honour and loyalty.

Tartan in Scott's youth was a barbarously coloured cloth, woven and worn by half naked highlanders who were not suitable company for the citizens of Edinburgh or Glasgow or indeed for any self-respecting Borderer.

It was George the Fourth's first Royal Visit to Edinburgh in 1822, which transformed it into the national dress of Scotland. And who suggested, arranged and stage-managed that Royal Visit? The same answer of course.

The King bought himself more than one outfit of highland dress especially for the visit. He had read the *Waverley* Novels, and thought he knew what was required. A kilt, as you know, requires eight yards of tartan - maybe nine, if you are as portly as George IV. But someone in Edinburgh saw the King coming and did quite well out of him. In Windsor Castle the receipt for what he bought still exists for £1254.18s which is certainly more than £100,000 today.

You probably knew all that, but did you know that novel-reading really began with Scott? The small, anonymous novel which came out two hundred years ago in 1814 under the title of *Waverley*, was the world's first bestseller. Scott earned ten times as much from it in its first year as Jane Austen earned for *Pride and Prejudice* in a lifetime. It was the first historical novel, the first novel to make novel-reading respectable.

The novels that flooded from the press, two a year in most of the next sixteen years including *Ivanhoe*, *Kenilworth*, *The Monastery*, *The Abbot*, *The Heart of Midlothian*, *Woodstock*, *Redgauntlet*, *The Fair Maid of Perth*, *Count Robert of Paris* created the readership for future novelists, for Dickens and Thackeray and George Eliot and Hardy and Pushkin and Balzac and Tolstoy (all of whom publicly acknowledged their debt to Scott) - and for John Buchan, who wrote a fine biography of Scott, and in our time JK Rowling.

What's more it was Scott and his publisher who first hit on the idea of cheap editions which more people could afford. By the end of Scott's life, novels which in the original form cost more than 30 shillings, were now on sale for five shillings and the reading public was suddenly enormous.

And finally there was his house.

All the money Scott made from his books, and some he hadn't yet made, he lavished on the building of Abbotsford, the house which you will visit tomorrow, and in buying 1200 acres of land around it. He loved what he called "the entirely new line in architecture" he invented for it: Scottish Baronial, which reflected the mediaeval, chivalrous world of his novels.

Like the houses of all the great writers Abbotsford will always be the exclusive property of Sir Walter Scott. It was there the man who put Scotland on the map, who created a notion of Scotland that was more romantic perhaps but also higher, more honourable, more noble than Scotland had been in the past; who raised Scotland's reputation in the world - there he lived and worked, walked, talked, entertained and wrote. Enjoy it when you visit it.

So, ladies and gentlemen, all around you here is the legacy of the Scotts.

Outside these walls is the beautiful landscape which generations of Scotts have nurtured and preserved and you are in a country the perception of which around the world was shaped by a very great Scott.

I am sure that if Hollywood had ever made a film about the Border Reivers, there would have been no-one better to play the Bold Buccleuch than Randolph Scott sitting tall in the saddle as he rode out by moonlight

You come from a proud line and you bear a proud name and you can be proud of coming home to Scott Country.