

Robert Burns: his connections to Newcastle and the North East

Robert or 'Rabbie' Burns (1759-1796) is Scotland's national bard. He is the author of poems such as Tam O'Shanter and writer of songs such as 'For a' that and a' that'. His popularity has resulted in his birthday (25 January) being celebrated throughout the world. Although at first glance Newcastle's main connection with the bard might appear to be the holding of Burns Suppers to commemorate his birthday, there are a number of other more specific links.

His visit to Newcastle in 1787


Burns only left Scotland on three occasions, all in May 1787 during a tour of the Borders, and his only overnight trip included a night in Newcastle. The purpose of the tour was to collect orders for and possibly distribute copies of the recent Edinburgh edition of his work and to look over potential farms for purchasing. The first visit to England on 7 May only involved crossing the bridge over the Tweed at Coldstream while the second involved a day trip to Berwick.

On 27 May 1787 he entered England with two companions for a five night journey to Dumfries. This involved overnight stays at Alnwick (with time spent at Warkworth), Morpeth, Newcastle, Wardrew, and Carlisle. Burns arrived by horseback in Newcastle on a Tuesday but it is not known what route he took when entering the city or where he spent the night. He stated in his journal that he met 'with a very agreeable sensible fellow a Mr Chatto a Scotchman who shows us a great many civilities and who dines and sups with us'. A story relating to his visit and first reported in 1834 is that during a meal he was surprised to find that the meat was served before soup. He was amused to be told that Northumbrians 'eat the beef before we sup the broth, lest the hungry Scotch make an inroad and snatch it'. He left Newcastle on the Wednesday morning and rode towards Hexham.

While in Newcastle, Burns wrote to his friend Robert Ainslie but only made very limited reference to his time in Newcastle. The local papers did not record the visit although the poem 'On a Scottish Bard' appeared in the Journal on 2 June. The paper's distributor was bookseller William Charnley, who is listed in the Edinburgh edition as the only subscriber residing in Newcastle.

The statue of Robert Burns in Newcastle

The only statue of Burns in the North of England was unveiled on 13 July 1901 in Walker Park, Newcastle. The Burns monument consisted of a 1.8 metre statue, and a 2 metre pedestal on top of a drinking fountain. In the nineteenth century, Scottish workers at local shipyards set up Walker Burns Club which raised the money for the monument. In the 1970s, due to ageing and vandalism, the statue was left without its head and both arms. The North East Federation of Burns clubs



arranged for the statue's restoration and it was re-sited in Heaton Park in 1975. In 1984 it broke into pieces when vandals attempted to roll it away. After over thirty years in storage, the statue has now been restored and was returned to Walker Park in August 2016 where it is located within the new park café. At the same time, a copy of the statue was placed in its original location in the park.

There is a bust of Burns in Sunderland Museum. It was presented by the Sunderland Burns Club on 7 April 1936. Until 2009, a wreath was laid annually by the club on Burn's birthday. In 2010 and 2011, due to bad weather and members' health, it was laid on the date of his death 21 July.

The Robert Burns statue fund trophy football matches at St James' Park


Between 1925 and 1928, the Robert Burns Statue/ Memorial Trophy match took place annually at St James' Park between teams of Home Scots and Anglo Scots. The home based Scots won the first three matches while the English based Scots won the last with Hughie Gallacher scoring twice. The first match was attended by 22,000 with an average of 18,000 for all four. The players were presented with a gold medal featuring a portrait of Robert Burns. Originally the aim of the fund committee was to erect a statue in Newcastle. The money raised was eventually donated to various causes including the Princess Mary maternity hospital.

Centenary celebrations in 1859

A large number of events took place in the North East to celebrate the centenary of Rabbie's birth. The Newcastle Chronicle published a free Burns supplement on 29 January which contained opinions, poems, and reports of events. Three parties took place in North Shields, one in South Shields, and there was a supper for 70 at Low Walker. In Newcastle, over 400 attended a festival dinner at the New Town Hall including Joseph Cowen senior and junior. There were also two theatre events, a 'crowded' peoples' festival at the Music Hall in Nelson Street, two Burns suppers in pubs and an alcohol free abstainers' festival attended by 1500. A number of events also took place in Newcastle on the 100th anniversary of his death in 1896.

Burns clubs and suppers

The first Burns Club in Newcastle was founded in at least 1816. The Newcastle and Tyneside Burns Club existed from 1864 to 1955/56. When it affiliated to the Burns Federation in 1906, it had 150 members. There have been a number of other North East clubs including in Gateshead, North Shields and South Gosforth, and there are current ones in Blyth, Berwick, and Durham. The most successful was the Sunderland Burns Club (1897-2011), while the Whitley Bay and District Society of St Andrew (1930-2001) affiliated to the Burns Federation in 1949. The first conference of the Federation to be held outside Scotland took place in Sunderland in 1907. The 1937 conference in Newcastle was attended by 400 delegates. The world conference was held in Seaton Burn in 2008. Until at least 1995, the North East Federation clubs held an annual meeting. Burns suppers have been held in the North East since at least 1808 and a number are planned for Newcastle on or around 25th January 2017 including one held by the Northumberland and Durham Caledonian Society (founded 1924) on 21st January.





Thomas Bewick and the work of Robert Burns

Thomas Bewick (1753-1828) provided wood engravings for two editions of 'The Poetical Works of Robert Burns, with his life'. Both were published in 1808 in Alnwick. The first was by Catnach and Davison, and the second by Davison on his own after the end of the partnership. The Tyne and Wear archive has two letters written in July 1808 by William Davison to Thomas Bewick. The first letter asks if he will engrave a likeness of Burns on wood for an edition of his poems. The second letter asks him to proceed with the work. A list of books owned by the Bewick family, drawn up by Jane Bewick in 1806, included five volumes of work by Burns.

Auld Lang Syne controversy

A debate which first took place in the nineteenth century was resurrected by Gateshead Council in the build up to the millennium. Claims were made that Gateshead composer William Shield (1748-1829), and not Burns, wrote the music for Auld Lang Syne as part of his opera Rosina. As both pieces are not identical, the evidence appears to suggest that both Burns and Shield borrowed from an older song. Burns never claimed authorship of the tune and stated that he 'took it down from an old man's singing'. As Burns wrote the words in 1788, he could have heard the old man on his trip to Newcastle the previous year.

Miscellaneous

Robert's younger brother William Burns (1767-1790) lived in Newcastle between April 1789 and early 1790. Robert sent four letters to him in Newcastle. William was an apprentice saddler with Walker and Robson of Middle Street, although the first letter was sent care of Mr Nicholson, a saddler in Newgate Street. He left Newcastle early in 1790 to take up a post as a saddler in London. Shortly after arriving in London though, he died of a fever on 24 July. Robert's son Lieutenant Colonel James Glencairn Burns married Sarah Robinson, daughter of James Robinson Postmaster at Sunderland. The Robinson family home was Herrington Hall.

There is a Burns Close in both Whickham and South Shields and ironically a Burns Crescent in Swalwell, the birthplace of William Shield. No streets in Newcastle are named after him. There is also no evidence of pubs named after him in Newcastle although there was a Robby Burns Inn in North Shields (from at least 1871 to 1908) and a Burn's Head Inn in South Shields (1820s). There is a pub called the Robbie Burns in Houghton le Spring.

More information on the works of Robert Burns

Newcastle City Library contains over eighty items on Robert Burns and his work, including five volumes of his work published in Newcastle between 1802 and 1819. If you have more information on the topic or want to find out more, please contact information@newcastle.gov.uk or phone 0191 2774100.

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