



## Travelling hopefully

TRAVELS With a Donkey has not only captured the imagination of generations of readers but has inspired many to follow In the Footsteps of RLS, with more than 6,000 hikers a year completing all or part of the trail through the Cevennes.

Among them last November was a group of RLS Club members who travelled there along with our friends from the Long John Silver Trust in Bristol and the Stevenson Way through the Highlands.

We were there to join in the celebrations marking the 20th anniversary of the *Association Sur le Chemin de Robert Louis Stevenson*, which has opened up access to the route he took and kept the spirit of RLS strong locally, some 137 years after his lone trek to get over his parting from Fanny Osbourne when she returned to California.

Stevenson first spent nearly a month in 1878 in the little town of Le-Monastier-sur-Gazeille, where he acquired his famous donkey Modestine, 'the colour of an ideal mouse and inimitably small'.

Today he is commemorated in Le Monastier by a handsome relief sculpture, and we found this delightful, his-



*A mountain town in France:: The British contingent join RLS in Le Monastier*

toric town had just renamed its library the *Bibliothèque Robert Louis Stevenson* in his honour.

When RLS set off from Le Monastier he travelled for many days, with some

difficulty as he learned to manage Modestine and his baggage, before he reached Florac, our next destination. Fortunately we found our journey was

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*Chip off the old block: Modestine reborn through the carver's art*

### Even the donkey had a moustache

**SACRE bleu!** This donkey appears to be growing some unusual facial hair. How can this be?

Was Modestine sprouting a moustache in support of the Movember campaign for men's health?

No, it was simply our European friends in France joining in the fun of RLS Day, which had travelled as far as the Cevennes from its birthplace in Edinburgh.

There the event was celebrated a little later on Louis's 164th birthday, with the RLS Club to the fore.

For a report on our day's events, please turn to the back page.



# In the footsteps of Stevenson with a donkey



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rather easier as the deputy mayor of Le Monastier kindly drove us by minibus. In a couple of hours on a golden autumn afternoon we travelled through the varied landscapes of Le Velay, Gévaudan and Lozère to the mountains of the Cévennes.

In Florac, a wide-ranging programme had been organised to mark the event with talks, films, guided tours and social events, including a ceilidh with a Scottish dance band, and, of course, donkeys. Shopkeepers had entered into the spirit with RLS references in their window displays. A bookshop's display showed a wealth of RLS titles published in French.

But business before pleasure. The most important part of our delegates' visit was to continue the Club's enthusiastic support for the European Network *In the footsteps of Robert Louis Stevenson*, which held its AGM as part of the event.

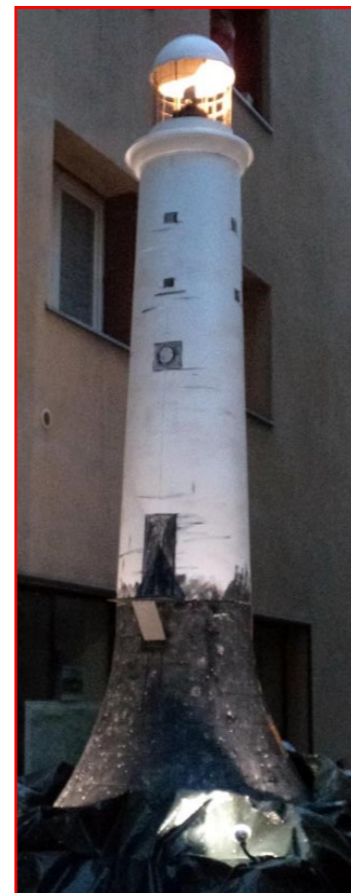
The Network promotes the life and works of RLS across Europe. It has members in France, the UK and Belgium and hopes to develop links with other European countries. It is applying for accreditation of the many RLS trails as a European Cultural Route.

The Council of Europe launched the Cultural Routes programme to demonstrate how the heritage of the different countries and cultures of Europe contributes to a shared cultural heritage. Accreditation would put the RLS trails in the same league as the famous Santiago de Compostela Pilgrim Routes.

Business done, the Florac celebrations concluded with an imaginative procession of floats depicting the life of RLS, from Edinburgh rain and an impressive Scottish lighthouse, through scenes from his *Inland Voyage* and other travels to a model of his last home Vailima in Samoa.

But the event was far from over. Ahead lay a two-day hike through the impressive wooded mountain scenery to St-Jean-du-Gard, passing through villages mentioned by RLS in his *Travels*. The donkeys were decked out with flags of the relevant countries. Following Modestine's stubborn example, one or two took advantage of their inexperienced donkey drivers, but everyone reached the destination in one piece.

At points along the route, actors portrayed vignettes of the First World War, such as a young woman at home and a young soldier at the front



*Spirit of RLS: His travels are celebrated in the Cévennes, along with his lighthouse ancestry*

thinking out loud about the letters they were writing to each other. On arrival at St Jean-du-Gard, the walkers joined in the November 11 commemoration at the war memorial, which was particularly poignant in the centenary year of the outbreak of the war.

The Network's French and British vice-presidents, Christian Brochier and our own Ian Gardiner, were invited to address the assembled townspeople. The UK participants wore our traditional red poppies in honour of those who fell, and to these we added the

*bleuet* (the cornflower) which was also chosen as a symbol because it continued to grow on battlefields.

Our poppies attracted the attention of the Dutch pastor of a church in St-Jean and led us into conversation with her. This seemed appropriate, given RLS's interest in the Protestant history of the area, which he wove into his narrative.

We were now in the town where RLS parted company with Modestine, and here our own *Travels* would end, with our thanks and congratulations to the organising team for a very well-planned event in which volunteers gave so generously of their time to ensure we were all well looked after – and well fed. Stevenson may have dined in the rain one night on Bologna sausage, chocolate and brandy but we fared much better and particularly enjoyed the local speciality of *aligot et saucisses*. On his travels RLS, met with kindness in some places and with a less helpful response in others, but we were received with friendship and hospitality everywhere.

As we left by train a commuter was reading *Le Voyage avec un Ane dans les Cévennes*. Clearly the name of RLS lives on here. It is up to the Club and the European Network to ensure it does so elsewhere.

concerns and include them in our revised 2015 bid. This will stress cooperation with Napier University on our RLS writing competition, involvement with children and youth on Ian Logan's Stevenson Way, the major festival of Stevenson's writing in Bristol, the RLS statue and associated projects in Colinton, the plans for a Stevenson Room in the refurbished North Berwick Museum and the Club's new publication, *The Catriona Trail*.

With further inputs from Belgium and France, we hope this will be a cause for celebration in 2015.

**AZERBAIJAN** may not have many RLS associations, but it was the setting for the Council of Europe Cultural Routes Annual Advisory Forum held in the capital city of Baku.

In furtherance of attempts to have *In the Footsteps of RLS* accredited as a European Cultural Route, RLS Club member Ian Gardiner attended on behalf of the network embracing Belgium, France, England and Scotland.

Its 2014 application was deferred by the board of examiners and Ian's brief was to address their

## Your Club Events Programme

MARCH 27

### THE BODY SNATCHER

A SPINE-CHILLING evening of suspense is guaranteed as we relive this macabre tale of horror and retribution. In the atmospheric and highly appropriate setting of The Jekyll and Hyde Tavern, John Shedden will recount this Stevenson classic in a new dramatisation.

Penned by RLS in 1881 and inspired by the case of Burke and Hare, *The Body Snatcher* tells the fateful story of two medical students, Fettes and Macfarlane, who as class assistants to the notorious anatomist Robert Knox become embroiled in certain dark, murderous practices.

Wine and food will be served. Cost £10. Arrive 7 for 7.30pm. The Jekyll and Hyde, Hanover Street, Edinburgh.

APRIL 25

### THE CATRIONA TRAIL

FOLLOW in the footsteps of David Balfour and Alan Breck on the Catriona Trail through East Lothian, detailed in a new guide by club member Ian Gardiner.

Meet at the Castle Inn in Dirleton at 10.30am for coffee, then relive David and Alan's adventures during the sequel to *Kidnapped*, in which Alan escapes by ship to France while David is captured and imprisoned on the Bass Rock.

The trail takes us along the beach to North Berwick, childhood haunt of RLS, where hungry hikers can enjoy their own picnic or purchase refreshment at the Scottish Seabird Centre.

Return to Dirleton by bus to collect your vehicle or, for those using public transport, remain on the bus to Edinburgh.

MAY 29

### BELL ROCK SEA SAFARI

'WHENEVER I smell salt water, I know that I am not far from one of the works of my ancestors. The Bell Rock stands monument for my grandfather, the Skerry Vhor for my Uncle Alan and when the lights come out at sundown along the shores of Scotland, I am proud to think they burn more brightly for the genius of my father.'

So wrote RLS in 1880, and the more adventurous of us will be visiting one of the Stevenson engineering masterpieces with a trip out to the Bell Rock. From a 10.30am rendezvous at the South Queensferry car park at the south-



*Movie treatment: Boris Karloff in The Body Snatcher by RL Stevenson*

ern end of the Forth Road Bridge, we travel by hired coach to Arbroath where we will board the Bell Rock Express for a one-hour trip in an inflatable open boat crewed by an Arbroath lifeboatman to the Inchcape Reef and the iconic Bell Rock Lighthouse completed by RLS's grandfather in 1811.

The boat can carry 11 people only but, sea conditions permitting, we are assured that two to three sailings can be made. Those left on shore will be able to view in comfortable surroundings a one-hour BBC documentary on the building of the lighthouse, enjoy light refreshments and view an exhibit.

We will return by coach in the late afternoon via Anstruther and the East Neuk. Cost around £40. *Names to Pat Watt by April 1.*

JUNE 29 – JULY 2

### STEVENSON'S LONDON

LONDON was a safety valve for the young RLS, a place to escape to when life in Edinburgh became too much. This summer the club will revisit some of his old haunts in the city of Jekyll and Hyde, where Louis would often stay at his club or with his friends Fanny

Sitwell and Sidney Colvin. At the National Portrait Gallery we will view Sir William Blake Richmond's portrait of RLS in 1887, along with portraits of some of his contemporaries, and hear about his friendship with the artist John Singer Sargent whom he met in Bohemian Paris.

At one point RLS thought of being called to the English Bar, and may have visited the Middle Temple, one of the four Inns of Court where we will enjoy lunch and inspect the coats of arms of the Rt Hon Joseph Jekyll and Sir Nicholas Hyde – was this where RLS got the names for his story?

Another highlight will be dinner at the Savile Club, where RLS was a member and could often be found regaling the assembled company with his brilliant conversation. His fellow members included Henry James, Rudyard Kipling, WB Yeats, Charles Darwin and Sir Edward Elgar.

While in London we will also join a guided walking tour of parts of the city associated with Charles Dickens and visit Dickens's recently-refurbished former residence at 48 Doughty Street.

We will be staying at Beit Hall, in the South Kensington campus of Imperial College – three-night stay costs £312 for a double, £246 for single, including en suite and breakfast. Savile Club dinner around £60pp, Middle Temple lunch from £20, Dickens tour £6.

Members should make their own way to London.

*Final bookings by April 1.*

## BOOKING

To book an event or for more information, contact Events Secretary Pat Watt at [patwatt@btinternet.com](mailto:patwatt@btinternet.com) or ring 0131 441 2580

## Louis is reborn in Lairdly style

ACTOR John Shedden has captivated radio, television and stage audiences for many years – yet one of his finest performances was saved for the tiny, unsung stage of the Priory Church at South Queensferry, on a wet, blustery evening last November.

The title of the one-man, little-known play was *The Laird of Samoa* and John played RLS, one of the inspirations of his life.

The author was John Cargill Thompson, known to only a few of us. While never quite finding fame as an actor, he fulfilled his love of the theatre as both playwright and drama school director. Before his untimely death, Cargill wrote more than 50 plays, five of them for John Shedden.

One of Cargill's strengths was his meticulous research into his subjects and perfectionist fine tuning of his words. He never permitted a comma to be altered. Combined with John's acting skills and deep knowledge and love of Stevenson, this produced something special on the little stage at the Priory Kirk beside the Forth.

The performance was intelligent, impassioned, sensuous, dramatic, sensitive, uplifting, frightening and even funny in parts as we were taken through Stevenson's childhood, his youth, his student bid for freedom from the inhibitions of Heriot Row, his life with the redoubtable Fanny Osbourne and finally exile in Samoa and untimely death.

The simple props and RLS mannerisms, his asides, turns of phrase, his likes and pet hates, were all there, properly in place to satisfy the most demanding RLS enthusiast, so that on the night John Shedden *was* Robert Louis Stevenson.

It was the best £10-worth we have enjoyed for many a year. So when do we get the repeat performance, John?

IAN NIMMO

## Come and join us

THE RLS Club committee has two important posts to fill from this summer. We need a Correspondence Secretary and an Events Secretary. If you would like to join the committee in either capacity, please contact John Macfie, details on this page, who can advise on the work involved.

## Write on target

THE Easter deadline is approaching for the RLS Creative Writing Competition for schools, run jointly by the Club and Edinburgh Napier University and judged by acclaimed novelist James Robertson, who will also conduct the Writers' Workshop for successful entrants. Full details at [www.robert-louis-stevenson.org](http://www.robert-louis-stevenson.org)



Early start: Delegates at the Florac AGM get into the merry spirit of RLS Day

# RLS Day Travels

THE journey of a lifetime – could Robert Louis Stevenson's own story be told in the space of a day through his own travel writing?

The Club set out to prove it could, with a day-long series of readings at the Scottish Storytelling Centre chronicling Louis's travels around Edinburgh, Scotland, France, America and the South Seas.

Our team contribution to RLS Day, which featured events around Edinburgh, at Colinton and further afield, was organised by Jeremy Hodges, supported by a full cast of Club members.

Memorable moments included *The Lantern Bearers*, complete with bullseye lantern as used by the boy Louis in North Berwick, and a dramatic rendition of Stevenson's comic encounter with the Commissary at Chatillon-sur-Loire.

The afternoon was spent travelling by emigrant ship and Wild West train to California, before honeymooning in a derelict mining camp at Silverado, and there was even time for a toboggan ride under the stars in Switzerland.

Our readings were augmented by actor Nigel Planer, who gave a wonderfully atmospheric rendition of Stevenson's *Night Among the Pines in the Cevennes*, and author Louise Welsh, who had to



Reluctant donkey driver: Louise Welsh

tackle the tricky ethical issues involved in beating a (female) donkey.

Professors Richard Dury and Robert Louis Abrahamson arrived fresh from delivering the day's most prestigious event – An Afternoon Tea for Idlers at 17 Heriot Row, based on Louis's famous *Apology* – to read from his South Sea writings, and the journey closed with the reading of *Requiem*.

As a lasting record of the day, the selected readings and linking passages have been assembled into an ebook. For a free copy in Kindle, epub or Word format, email Jeremy Hodges, details in the contacts box below.

## Not forgotten...

STEVENSON was inspired by the poet Robert Fergusson, once declaring 'Fergusson lives in me', and like Robert Burns he modelled his Scots poems on those of the young man who died in the Edinburgh Bedlam at the age of 24.

Club president John Macfie joined members of the Scottish Arts Club at the annual wreath-laying in the Canon-gate kirkyard on October 16, the date of the poet's untimely death in 1774.



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