

# The RLS Club News



Issue No 63

Autumn 2024



*Dunbar gathering: In full view of the Bass Rock, right, where David Balfour is held captive in *Catriona**

## Bridging the gap

FROM Dunbar to the Bass Rock is a distance of seven miles – and 273 years since 1751, when David Balfour was imprisoned there in *Catriona*.

Yet the gap was bridged with ease when a Club visit to Dunbar was led by Cynthia Stephens, who has a family connection with the Stevenson novel.

Louis was a Balfour cousin of Cynthia's great-grandmother and gave a speech at her wedding to Tam Dale, whose name he would 'borrow' for the

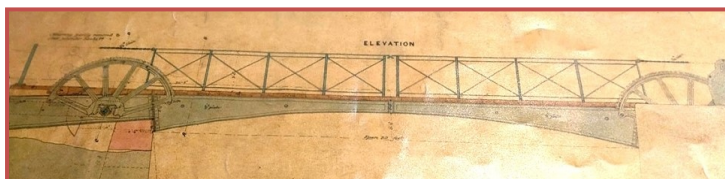
keeper of the Bass in *Catriona*. Club members were regaled with the relevant passages from the Tale of Todd Lapraik, which terrifies David's superstitious captors in the novel when Tam is attacked by an uncannily malevolent solan goose or gannet.

While Cynthia's great-grandmother was a Balfour cousin of Louis's mother, there was also a Stevenson connection to explore. The new Victoria Harbour at Dunbar was completed in 1861

under the supervision of Louis's engineer uncle David of the family firm D & T Stevenson, in which he shared duties with Louis's father Tom.

A distinctive drawbridge designed by D & T Stevenson was the final stage, bridging the channel connecting the old and new harbours.

The sun shone on our visit, although the wind tried to blow us off our feet – and there was the unexpected bonus of the Dunbar Civic Week celebrations.



*Original design: By the family firm of D & T Stevenson for the new lifting bridge where the old and new harbours meet*

### Jekyll silent no more

A SILENT film based on the 1887 play of Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde was staged to great acclaim at the Glasgow Cathedral Festival, with organist Donald Mackenzie giving a live accompaniment with sound effects to the 1920 movie starring John Barrymore.

**Inside: RLS Day in 130th anniversary year, Club Events, European news and the Wick Mail**





## Your chance to celebrate

CLUB members and friends will be celebrating RLS Day 2024 with The Education of an Engineer, a selection of readings at the Edinburgh Writers' Museum telling the story of Louis's reluctant apprenticeship to the family engineering firm at Anstruther, Wick, Orkney, Shetland and Earraid. If you would like to read on Wednesday November 13, email Jeremy Hodges, [jemhodges@gmail.com](mailto:jemhodges@gmail.com). For the full RLS Day programme visit <https://rlsday.wordpress.com>

### SAMOA AND STEVENSON

JOIN a panel of Pacific researchers and artists to explore the life and legacy of RLS in Samoa, with the screening of a film made by young Samoan film makers. The November 13 event at the National Library of Scotland will be accompanied by a *Robert Louis Stevenson and the Pacific* display. Tickets free but must be booked via the NLS website, [www.nls.uk](http://www.nls.uk)

### RLS AND KATHERINE MANSFIELD IN MENTON

THEY never met, but RLS and Katherine Mansfield were both fine poets who spent time in Menton. Club member Martin White will set the scene for Dr Ainsley McIntosh, comparing their poems on similar subjects, and James Appleby, on the challenges of interpreting their work into French. The event at the French Institute in Edinburgh, 6pm on November 14, is free to Institute members, £5 to others. To book, visit [ifecosse.org.uk](http://ifecosse.org.uk) and click What's On.



### STEVENSON IN STYLE

CELEBRATE the life of Robert Louis Stevenson in style with a glittering four-course dinner aboard the former Northern Lighthouse Board tender *Fingal* in Leith, where actor and RLS aficionado Nigel Planer will entertain guests. For £175 the November 16 event offers luxury dining with music and drinks including a Treasure Island cocktail. To book call 0131 357 5000.

# Keeping Stevenson alive over 130 years

THIS year marks the 130th anniversary of Stevenson's death in Samoa on December 3, 1894, since when his reputation as a writer has waxed and waned before undergoing a strong revival.

Throughout World War One his novels sustained countless weary troops eager to escape the misery of trench warfare and in later decades, when it became fashionable among the literati to regard Stevenson as a sentimental writer of children's fiction, sustained sales of *Treasure Island*, *Kidnapped* and *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* showed the reading public felt otherwise.

And all the time the Club formed in Stevenson's honour has kept the flame burning, promoting interest in his life and works and spreading the word to new generations with events such as the RLS Day celebrations in his native Edinburgh and beyond.

In 2012, a year after the annual celebration of Stevenson's November 13 birthday was created by Edinburgh Napier University and Edinburgh City of Literature, the Club came on board with a day-long reading of the whole of *Treasure Island* at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery.

This featured readings by actor Nigel Planer and the late John Sessions – who gave all the pirates Scottish accents. With his death in 2020 Louis lost a good friend, but Nigel has remained committed to RLS Day over the years and will return this November to entertain guests aboard *Fingal*, see panel left.

Since 2011, through the efforts of the Club's own Professor Linda Dryden, RLS Day has staged keynote



*Absent friend: John Sessions, pictured on RLS Day 2012 with Nigel Planer, had a lifelong love of Stevenson*

events with guest speakers including best-selling authors Ian Rankin and Louise Welsh, broadcasters Jim Naughtie and Alan Little, radio dramatist Jane Rogers and film score composer Howard Blake.

Meanwhile the Club has played a key role in presenting different aspects of Stevenson's work through a themed series of readings. In 2014 it was Stevenson's Travels by canoe and donkey in France, then across the Atlantic to the States and onward to the South Seas. In

### Making a mark in Menton

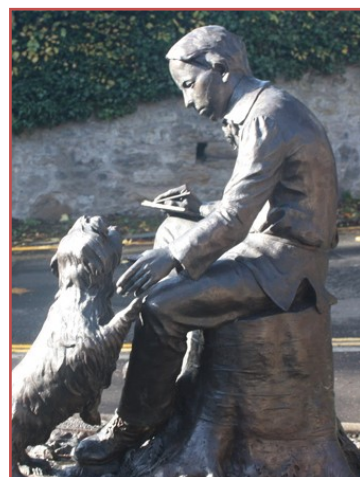
A PLAQUE marking Stevenson's Ordered South convalescence in Menton in 1873/74 is now with the manufacturer and it is hoped to hold an unveiling ceremony in early December.



## Boy and dog in car crash drama

YOUNG Louis and his dog Coolin were unwittingly involved in a road accident when a runaway car rolled into the £30,000 statue of them near the Manse in Colinton.

It is understood that the driver had neglected to apply the handbrake properly before enjoying a day's fishing in August, and the car then rolled backwards down the slope. Luckily both boy and dog escaped uninjured.

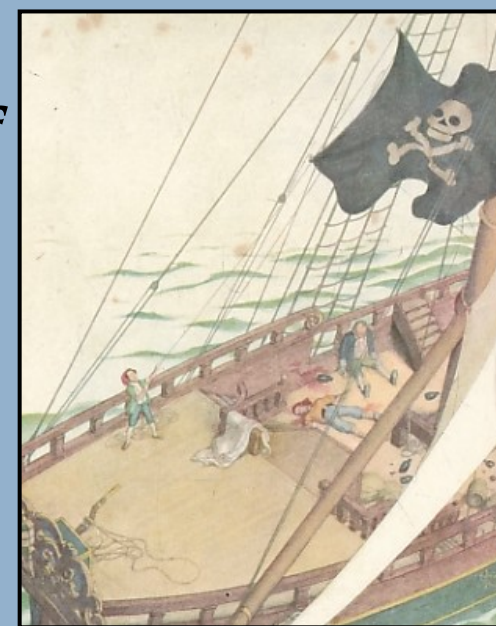


## Rare chance to enjoy the best of Treasure Island

A RARE illustrated edition of *Treasure Island* forms the focal point of a display at the National Library of Scotland throughout RLS week and beyond.

Just 50 copies of the book, bound in velum with gilt textblock edges, were printed on handmade paper by Ernest Benn in 1927. The watercolour illustrations by Edmund Dulac include 'Striking the Jolly Roger', pictured right, and are among the most beautiful found in any edition.

The display, organised by Club committee member and rare books curator James Mitchell, can be seen at the National Library until March 2025



## EVENTS PROGRAMME

### OCTOBER 11

#### RLS – A LIFE IN SONG

JOIN folk singer and RLS biographer Jeremy Hodges for an evening of wine and song at Louis's Heriot Row home, told in Stevenson's own poetry with new musical settings for voice and guitar. Tickets at £10 including wine should be booked early as the event is limited to 30 guests, gathering 7pm to 9pm at 17 Heriot Row.

### NOVEMBER 23

#### ANNUAL LUNCHEON

TO be held at The New Club, Edinburgh. Full details in accompanying papers.

### DECEMBER 6

#### COFFEE AND MINCE PIES

FESTIVE gathering at Valvona and Crolla, Elm Row, Edinburgh, 10am–12 noon.

### JANUARY 18

#### CHASING THE FOOTSTEPS OF RLS

ENJOY a talk by Club member Martin White about new RLS developments in Europe and also comparing the Edinburgh days of Stevenson, Henry James and Mark Twain. Meet New Club, Edinburgh for coffee at 10.30am. Cost £10.

### MARCH 13

#### LIGHT ENTERTAINMENT

MEET aboard *Fingal* at The Shore, Leith for coffee and a talk on Stevenson Lighthouses by Charlie Granleese. Pre-booked lunch optional. Time and costs TBA.

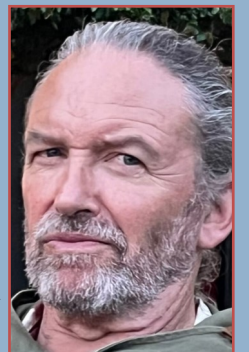
**BOOK all events at least a week beforehand with Margaret Wilkie, [wilkiejl@blueyonder.co.uk](mailto:wilkiejl@blueyonder.co.uk) 0131 477 6738 or 07815 845586**

## Our guest speaker

THE guest speaker at the Club's Annual Luncheon this year will be author and broadcaster Nicholas Rankin.

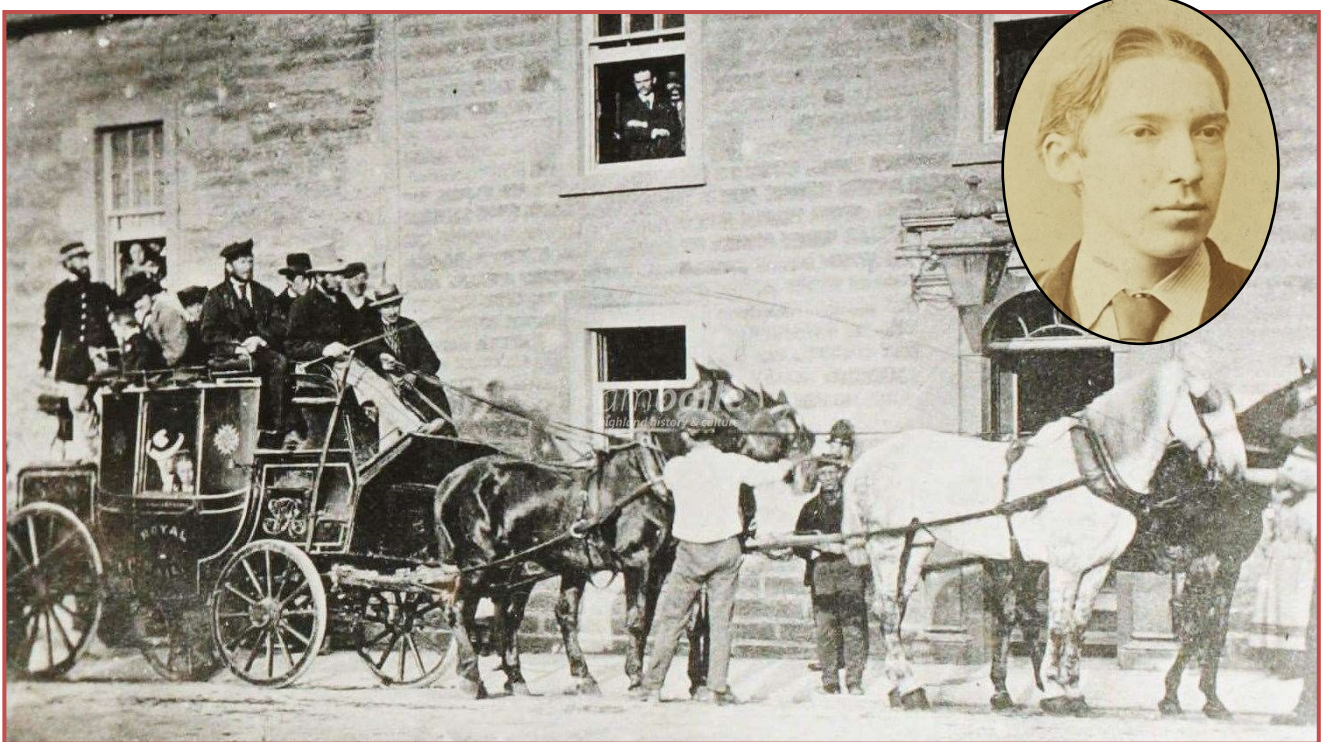
In 1987 his book *Dead Man's Chest: Travels After Robert Louis Stevenson*, combining biography with a personal journey in Louis's footsteps worldwide, set a new standard in writing about RLS, leading to a fresh wave of interest in the author.

Nick is also an authority on *King Solomon's Mines* author H. Rider Haggard and has lectured on links between the two writers, notably at an RLS Day event in 2022.





# A journey into the past



*Romance of the past: Louis boarded the ancient Wick Mail coach, built to a design unchanged since the days of Dick Turpin*

THE worldwide travels of Robert Louis Stevenson by transatlantic steamer, emigrant train and Pacific schooner have long been famous – but how many are aware of his journey into the past aboard an ancient mail coach?

To return home from his education as an engineer in Wick, Louis had to brave an overnight journey of 50 miles by road as far as Golspie before catching the train to Edinburgh.

Perched beside the driver on the outside of the Royal Mail coach, unchanged since the days of the highwaymen, he

enjoyed an adventure which he had longed for since childhood.

His account of the journey, in a letter to his cousin Bob Stevenson, is a vivid description of a moonlit ride through open country, punctuated by stops at each coaching 'stage' to change horses and fortify the inner man with a dram to keep out the November cold.

It includes character sketches of the driver, shamelessly soliciting a half-crown as a handsome tip for his services, and of a commercial traveller, regarded by Louis's father as a dangerous 'infidel'

when they met in Anstruther five years previously, who now insists on standing Louis a whisky.

The coach then clatters onward to the next stage, where 'men were waiting for us by the roadside, with the horses – sleepy, yawning men', before arriving at last in Golspie to smoke a pipe at the inn 'and then round to the station, to fall asleep in the train.'

To hear young Stevenson's full account of the journey visit the Wick social history website [www.wickvoices.co.uk](http://www.wickvoices.co.uk) and click on 'Recordings'.

## Celebrating RLS in the Cevennes

AS the Association Sur Le Chemin de Robert Louis Stevenson celebrates its 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the town of Langogne will host this year's AGM of the European Cultural Route.

In addition to the December 7 AGM there will be civic receptions and the planting of a Stevenson rose, with other events from December 6-10. To attend the celebrations, contact Martin White, [martiniwhiter26@gmail.com](mailto:martiniwhiter26@gmail.com)

As President of the European Cultural Route, Martin presented a paper on Travel Writers Decoded to the academic RLS 2024 conference hosted in June by Ruhr University in Germany.

## Piratical panto capers set sail on Hispaniola

THE pantomime season is nearly upon us, but this year there is an entertaining show with a difference – a comic version of Treasure Island in which Jim Hawkins works at an Edinburgh home for reformed pirates and past-it privateers.

Weary of his drab, city existence he embarks on a voyage to Orkney in search of buried treasure with Lean Jean Silver, Ben Gunn and the usual motley crew, plus a quantity of puffsins.

Treasure Island is at the Royal Lyceum, Edinburgh, November 28 – January 4.



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