

# The RLS Club News



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## Friends of RLS on the Riviera

WHEN Robert Louis Stevenson was Ordered South by his doctor in a state of nervous collapse after a year of religious rows with his parents, he knew nobody in the sunny Mediterranean town of Menton.

But in 1874 he soon made himself at home at the Hotel Mirabeau where he made many friends, including two Russian ladies who took him under their wing.

And today he has no shortage of friends in the French town, which honoured him last November with special events to mark his 172nd birthday, attended by several Club members.

Central to the celebrations was the Annual General Meeting of the European Cultural Route In the Footsteps Of Robert Louis Stevenson, followed by visits to various sites in the town which Louis came to love so well. In glorious sunshine, under Stevenson's



*Flowering friendship: David Rousseau is presented with an RLS rose*

beloved blue skies, the visitors were well entertained by the town of Menton, and in particular David Rousseau, its Head of Culture and Tourism.

Tours of the town included the planting of several special Stevenson roses, *une variété très robuste* developed by a French rose specialist, at the English Church attended by Stevenson, at the Po University and at the Jardin Fontana Rosa, a literary garden created by the Spanish Novelist Blasco Ibañez to celebrate writers ranging from Balzac to Dickens – and now Stevenson.

Elsewhere, more than 70 people enjoyed a poetry event in which the poems of Stevenson and Katherine Mansfield, another one-time Menton resi-

dent, were brought together with expert commentary from Club member Ainsley Mackintosh.

The whole event was a great success and we hope to return to Menton soon for the grand unveiling of a commemorative plaque being gifted by the Club to celebrate the start of Stevenson's career as a professional writer in a place he held so dear.



*Louis in bloom: Cultural Route General Secretary Michel Legros planting a Stevenson rose*



*Honour: Martin White*

### Monsieur le President

THE new President of the European Cultural Route In The Footsteps Of Robert Louis Stevenson is... our own Martin White.

A Club committee member with a wide range of Stevenson interests, Martin has been a key figure in forging the Club's links with our friends in Europe.

He said: 'It is a great honour to be elected as the first non-French President. I'll bring some very different perspectives to the role and route – and will enjoy the challenge of most of the conversation being in French.'

**Inside: Celebrating RLS Day, Website Revamp, Stevenson and Sassoon, Louis in Germany**





## A fitting tribute to Palema

HE was not just a cousin of RLS but a much-loved member of the Stevenson household at Vailima, where the Samoans gave him the name of Palema.

On the death of his parents, Graham Balfour took to globetrotting which led him to Japan and eventually Samoa – where he ended up staying for more than two years.

After Stevenson's death he returned to England and began a career as an eminent educationist, for which he was knighted.

His wife Rhoda was from Birkenhead, where they both now lie buried. In recent years the grave had fallen into disrepair but the Club is now delighted to report that it has been fully restored – a fitting tribute to Palema's memory.

### Committee business

WE welcome Anna Donaldson to the Club committee, subject to ratification by the AGM, and say a big thankyou to Tom Murison, who is standing down after years of service. Our chairman Jon Cossar has indicated that he will demit office in June 2025, and members are now asked to consider the question of his successor.

### CONTACTS

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# Many Happy Returns, Louis, 173 years young



ROBERT Louis Stevenson's 173rd birthday was marked with celebrations in his home city of Edinburgh and the wider world, where the writings and the life of this most charismatic of authors still inspire many thousands today.

Central to the celebrations was the Club's annual luncheon at the New Club in Edinburgh, where toasts were drunk with fine views of the city which was always in his thoughts, no matter where he might go.

Our guest speaker Chris Dolan, recipient of the 1999 Robert Louis Stevenson Memorial Award, took us on his fascinating life journey from teacher to playwright, poet, novelist, book author, film, television and radio dramatist – with Stevenson as a major influence all the way.

The Club's main public event was a portrayal of Stevenson's Life in Letters at the Writers' Museum, with a dozen members reading a selection of his best correspondence from age six to just before his death.

We saw him as a young would-be engineer in Anstruther, complaining about the lack of wine with his meals in lodgings, and later at a hotel in Wick, remonstrating with a drunk who kept him awake by preaching sermons in the stairwell.

We experienced the trauma of religious rows with his parents, his nightmarish train journey across the States in pursuit of Fanny Osbourne, his elation at selling *Treasure Island* as a book, and his struggles with illness all the way to Samoa, whose people are brought vividly to life.

Stevenson's life story was celebrated also in song as A Writer of Note, with musical settings of his poems sung by Jeremy



Hodges, including a drinking song set to a tune of Louis's own making as he tootled away on his flageolet.

In verse, Stevenson was influenced by the revolutionary American poet Walt Whitman, whose work he read in secret since his parents would have disapproved.

*Club celebration: Members at the annual lunch in the New Club were addressed by guest speaker Chris Dolan, top. Left: Jeremy Hodges in a musical tribute to RLS*

A fascinating talk about Whitman's poetry and the effect it had on the young Edinburgh writer was given by Robert-Louis Abrahamson, an expert on both authors.

In later life Stevenson became friends with JM Barrie, although they never met. Club member John Shedden turned their correspondence into a two-hander play, which he was due to perform at the Writers' Museum with Peter Berry. But when illness prevented Peter from appear-

ing, John manfully took on both roles in a dramatic tour de force, matching each letter with the right voice.

Other events included a talk at the Scottish National Gallery about William Brassey Hole – illustrator of Stevenson's work, who as a young man enjoyed high jinks with Louis at Fleeming Jenkin's amateur theatricals – and Californian celebrations, with an Unbirthday event in Monterey and a whisky tasting in St Helena.

## RLS Website revitalised

THE Robert Louis Stevenson Website is being revitalised to bring it fully up to date, cementing its position as the world's most comprehensive resource for RLS lovers.

Operated by Edinburgh Napier University, the site offers a wealth of material relating to Stevenson's life and works, and includes pages dedicated to the RLS Club. These now include a complete list of

downloadable back issues of RLS Club News from 2011 onwards.

There are also links to RLS Day events dating back to 2017, including several downloadable resources and a complete text of the full-length Stevenson biography *Lamplit, Vicious Fairy Land*, by Club member Jeremy Hodges.

All can be accessed by following links at <https://robert-louis-stevenson.org>



## Truly one but truly two

SCOTTISH actor Forbes Masson gave a riveting, one-man performance of *Jekyll & Hyde* in Gary McNair's take on Stevenson's tale at Edinburgh's Royal Lyceum.

Transitioning seamlessly from his main role as the story's narrator, Mr Utterson, to several other characters including Jekyll himself, Masson appeared on a minimalist set design which was eerily dark but brought startlingly to life by bright variations of white light, the darkness and light complementing the duality of the story.

It was a compelling piece of pure theatre – one man, one voice and the gripping power of language.

## EVENTS PROGRAMME

### MARCH 16

#### ALONG THE BEACH WITH RLS

JOIN a walk from Dirleton to North Berwick led by Ian Gardiner on Saturday March 16, passing RLS locations featured in *Catriona*, the *Treasure Island* of Fidra and the *Lantern Bearers* cave at Point Garry. Meet 11am, Castle Inn, Dirleton, names to Margaret Wilkie to arrange coffee.

### APRIL 17

#### COFFEE AND CROISSANTS

MEET with other Club members for a coffee morning at Valvona & Crolla, 19 Elm Row, Edinburgh, 10am-12noon on Wednesday April 17.

### MAY 28-31

#### EDUCATION OF AN ENGINEER II

AFTER our successful visit to Anstruther, follow Louis's further education as an engineer at the harbour works in Wick with a trip north led by Mitchell Manson. Rooms have been reserved at Mackays Hotel until March 15. Please note an interest before this date. Further details from Margaret Wilkie.

### JUNE 8

#### A WALK AROUND DUNBAR

THE harbour at Dunbar was extended and improved by the firm of D&T Stevenson, run by Louis's uncle David and father Thomas. Join Cynthia Stephens on Saturday June 8 for a guided tour exploring the RLS connections, meet 12noon outside the Town House in the High Street.

### JUNE 22

#### ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

HAVE your say on the running of the Club at our AGM, starting with coffee at 10am at the Faculty of Advocates, Old Assembly Close, 172 High Street, Edinburgh.

### JULY 6

#### REVOLUTIONARY RLS

VISITING Scotland from Australia, Professor Deirdre Coleman of the University of Melbourne has kindly agreed to give a talk to the Club on The Stevensons in Revolutionary Samoa 1888-1894. Saturday July 6, 10.30am, Faculty of Advocates, Old Assembly Close, 172 High Street, Edinburgh.

### DIARY DATE

THIS year's Club Lunch to mark the birthday of RLS will be held a little later than usual on Saturday November 23 at The New Club, Edinburgh. Full details and order forms in our Autumn issue.

**BOOK all events two weeks beforehand with Margaret Wilkie, wilkiejl@blueyonder.co.uk 0131 477 6738 or 07815 845586**



# Stevenson amid the shell-shock

STEVENSON was spared the horrors of the First World War but 20 years after his death his books gave solace and a much-needed diversion to the men in the trenches – including the war poet Siegfried Sassoon.

And when Sassoon came to Edinburgh to recover from shell-shock (now PTSD) at Craiglockhart House military hospital, he brought his love of Stevenson with him.

An insight into his time there, along with other officers and men including his fellow poet Wilfred Owen, is provided in a new book by Charles Glass.

In *Soldiers Don't Go Mad: A Story of Brotherhood* he tells how Sassoon 'took long, lonely treks through the Pentland Hills remembering that the great Scottish author of *Kidnapped* and *Treasure Island*, Robert Louis Stevenson, had walked the same green knolls thirty years before'.

Meanwhile the recovering Owen taught 39 boys at Edinburgh's Tynecastle High School, and Glass recounts how he told them that RLS had 'lived in and written about Scottish terrain that the boys knew'.

Owen took his pupils on a visit to Swanston Cottage to see where the author had spent his summers as a young man



**War poet: Sassoon roamed the Pentlands**

and, as part of his own researches, the shell-shocked poet paid a visit to Walter Blaikie, with whom RLS had shared the same nurse, Alison Cunningham, and found 'old Blaikie affects a contempt for RLS'.

Yet Owen 'revelled in the notion that his pupils knew Stevenson better than this person who played with him before even *Treasure Island* was dreamed of'.



## RLS old flame who nursed the wounded

SASSOON may not have known that in another hospital a few miles away was the woman to whom Stevenson once proposed.

Flora Masson, who as a young woman acted in amateur theatricals with RLS, never married but became a pioneering nurse with Florence Nightingale and, in later life, nursed wounded soldiers at Whitehill Red Cross Hospital by Rosewell, just to the south of Edinburgh.

Long after Louis married Fanny Osbourne, Flora was said to still treasure his letter of proposal.

# Louis, 11, recalls gambling in spa town

WHILE much has been written about Stevenson's time in France, relatively little is known about his visits to Germany.

To his parents' consternation, he and his friend Sir Walter Simpson once took lodgings in the red-light district of Frankfurt in 1872, but he also made more sedate visits along with his parents to places such as the spa town of Homburg, where his father had been sent by his doctor to 'take the waters'.

Now RLS enthusiast Thomas Obst, who lives in Kronberg near Homburg, has been in touch with local knowledge of Louis's visits there.

Dr Obst writes: 'In 1875 he stayed with his parents in the Hotel Russischer Hof (Russian Court), now a corner house with shops, situated diagonally across from their lodgings in



**Hotel Russischer Hof: The Stevensons stayed here in 1875**

1862, when they stayed privately with a Mrs Zahn. The house is still there and a plaque commemorates his visit.'

A local newspaper list of foreign visitors to Homburg includes 'Herr R.L. Stevenson' staying with Frau Zahn along with his parents. While RLS

was fluent in French, he spoke little German: 'When I am not nervous, I can generally ask for anything I want, although it is indeed improbable that I shall be able to understand the answer.' Yet his memories of visiting Homburg were crystal clear after staying there as an

11-year-old. Thirty years later, he would recall sitting outside the casino: 'I heard first in Homburg the continuous ringing of counted money on the tables of a gaming house.'

'Sitting on the terrace, I became suddenly aware of it... a fine band of music played without there daily, and I have forgot the music; but I think when I come to lie dying, I shall still be able to recall (as I do now) the more delicate concert from within. It chanced I was to hear it again and yet again in the course of my vagrant life.'

'I thought then already, as I think still today, that there are few sounds to be compared with it in nature; and it is a singular thought to me now and in this faraway place, that the song of the money is still going on in Europe, like the song of birds, perennial.'