

UPDATE

The Robert Louis Stevenson Club June 2024



WHEN a 17-year-old from Edinburgh arrived in Wick for work experience building the new breakwater, nobody could guess he would become an international best-selling author.

His main task was struggling to erect marker poles in a heavy swell to show where his father's firm should build the ill-fated structure – a far cry from penning *Treasure Island*, *Kidnapped* or *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll & Mr Hyde*.

For the young Robert Louis Stevenson, Wick was an education, not just in the challenges of engineering but in learning about life there in the autumn of 1868. And at the end of May, Club members followed in his footsteps on a three-day visit to Caithness

They began with Wick Heritage Museum, to experience the busy harbour in the herring season, which had ended in such a disappointing catch that the authorities feared a riot, calling in extra police and two gunboats.

Louis, shivering in a 'black wind', encountered Gaelic-speaking Lewis fishermen, 'lubberly, stupid, inconceivably lazy and heavy to move... you are forced to leave the pavement at every step'.

Yet despite first impressions of a cold, bleak town, he found Wick had a warm heart. At the New Harbour Hotel, he had herring and finnan haddie for breakfast, Latheron cheese rolls and sherry to warm him after the morning's work, then 'heaps o' things' for dinner at night, with beer, wine and a nightcap, all for four shillings and fourpence.

Today's visitors had a glimpse inside the building, now the home of the *John*

Far north in Louis's footsteps



Tour of inspection: At Holburn Head lighthouse, visited by RLS and his father

O'Groat Journal, with a warm welcome from journalist Alan Hendry. And there was a similar welcome at Wick Heritage Museum, where volunteers Lyn Morrison and Ian Leith

shared a wealth of local knowledge about Wick in its herring heyday and Stevenson's time there. He enjoyed exciting times – witnessing a shipwreck

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History tour: Club members enjoyed a fascinating morning at the Wick Heritage Centre for a vivid insight into the life of the town where Louis spent a happy if cold six weeks of his life before his dream of becoming an author became a reality

Annual General Meeting

THE Annual General Meeting of the Robert Louis Stevenson Club will be held on Saturday June 22 at 10am in the Mackenzie Building of the Faculty of Advocates, Old Assembly Close, 172 High Street, Edinburgh, conducted by our Chairman Jon Cossar.

The AGM is your chance to elect Committee members and air your ideas for the Club's future development.

Warm welcome in a bleak town where Louis met many friends

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at Shaltigoe, rescuing a workman from drowning and donning a heavy suit and helmet for a glimpse under the waves with diver Bob Bain.

But Stevenson's letters to his mother were more about the welcome he received from local people, from Admiral Rutherford, the Pulteneytown harbour master, to the family of Sheriff Hamilton Russell.

Today's visitors were able to see the home in Breadalbane Terrace where Stevenson spent many happy hours with the Russells' son Adam and daughter Sara, with whom he enjoyed a romantic after-dinner moonlit stroll to the Castle of Old Wick

Today's visitors recreated the walk and also viewed the Tinkers' Cave, where Stevenson found the male inhabitants were always drunk, 'the great villainous looking fellows sleeping off the last debauch'.

In 1869, Louis returned to Caithness with his father and visited Thurso before embarking on an inspection tour of Stevenson lighthouses. To-

day's visitors followed in their footsteps to Holburn Head, where the lighthouse keeper was 'in such a woundy fright, growing redder and redder and breathing hard in mortal terror' for fear Stevenson's father would not find the light in good order.

The RLS Club minibus called also at the Stevenson lighthouses at Dunnet Head and Noss Head, and also at Ackergill Tower. There young Stevenson was shown around by its chate-laine, Elizabeth Wemyss, and met her young son Will, a midshipman in the Navy who had consumption, of which he would die two years later.

As today's visitors headed home – on more comfortable transport than the Wick mail on which Stevenson departed – it was with happy memories of a town with a warm heart.



Along the beach with RLS



AFTER five days of March rain, 11 Club members enjoyed a coastal walk in glorious weather from Dirlerton to North Berwick.

Led by Ian Gardiner, the walk took in various scenes associated with *Treasure Island*, *Catriona* and *The Pavilion on the Links*, and included the little cave of *The Lantern Bearers*. The leisurely two-hour walk was then rounded off with lunch at the Scottish Seabird Centre in North Berwick.

EVENTS

JULY 6

REVOLUTIONARY RLS

PROF Deirdre Coleman of the University of Melbourne will talk on *The Stevensons in Revolutionary Samoa 1888-1894* at 10.30am, Faculty of Advocates, Old Assembly Close, 172 High Street, Edinburgh.

SEPTEMBER 5

COFFEE MORNING

MEET with fellow Stevensonians for coffee, croissants and conviviality, 10am at Valvona & Crolla, 19 Elm Row, Edinburgh.

OCTOBER 11

RLS, A WRITER OF NOTE

JOIN folk singer and RLS biographer Jeremy Hodges for a musical journey through Louis's life at his home at 17 Heriot Row, Edinburgh. Meet 7pm, cost £10 including wine, book with Margaret Wilkie now.

DIARY DATES: This year's Club Lunch will be on Saturday Nov 23 at The New Club, Edinburgh. Details and order forms in our Autumn issue. The AGM of the European Cultural Route 'In the Footsteps of Robert Louis Stevenson' is scheduled for Langogne in the Cevennes, Nov 6-10.

BOOKING: Call Margaret Wilkie, 0131 477 6738 or 07815 845586, email wilkiejl@blueyonder.co.uk

CONTACTS

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