

The dramatic
and picture-perfect
Dunvegan Castle on
the Isle of Skye



Castles & Clans

Robin McKelvie feels the pull of his forebears on a tour of Scotland's fortresses

Think of Scotland and the images instantly conjured are of craggy castles set amid dramatic landscapes of mighty mountains and tumbling glens – ancient fortifications that have helped to define both the country and its people.

Many of these castles linger intoxicatingly on today, telling the stories of the royals and clans whose dramas and intrigues were played out within their sturdy, atmospheric walls.

The granddaddy of all of Scotland's castles is the mighty fortress that presides over the Scottish capital. Edinburgh Castle is still garrisoned today and imprints itself on city life, its famous daily 'One O'Clock Gun' sharply separating locals from alarmed visitors. It is home to both the Stone of Destiny (where Scotland's monarchs were once crowned) and the sparkle of the Scottish Crown

Jewels. Many clans have left their indelible mark on Edinburgh Castle, most memorably the Stuarts, the Scottish monarchs who went on to rule the whole of Britain.

It was here that perhaps the most romantic of all Scottish monarchs, Mary, Queen of Scots gave birth to her son, King James VI of the Scots, in 1566. The birth was said to have been so traumatic that magic was even attempted in a bid to transfer the birth pains on to one of the queen's servants. James VI went on to rule England and Ireland as King James I following the union of the Scottish and English crowns in 1603 until his death in 1625.

Some Scots rate Stirling Castle even more highly than Edinburgh; they are similarly spectacular in appearance but you could argue that Stirling is even more strategically important. This foreboding fortress



guards the approaches from the Lowlands of Scotland to the foothills of the Highlands. For centuries if you wanted to hold sway over Scotland you had to take Stirling. Stand on the ramparts here by King Robert the Bruce's equestrian statue and you can see the site of his most famous victory over the English at the Battle of Bannockburn (1314). The National Wallace Monument (commemorating William 'Braveheart' Wallace) rises impressively on the other flank, overlooking the site of his most famous victory at the Battle of Stirling Bridge in 1297.

Mary, Queen of Scots was crowned within the walls of Stirling Castle and the grandeur of those Stuart glory days has been recreated by the recent refurbishment of the voluminous Great Hall. Ironically the castle also bore witness to one of the last acts in the Stuart saga

in 1746 when Bonnie Prince Charlie – on his ill-fated Jacobite quest to restore the Stuarts to the British throne – failed to take Stirling Castle. Just a short distance from Stirling is a castle that until recently had relatively few visitors. All that changed when the producers of the TV drama *Outlander* chose Doune Castle as one of its key locations, Castle Leoch, seat of the show's MacKenzie clan.

In reality, Walter Stewart, Earl of Menteith, commissioned this evocative ruin in the 13th century. Robert Stewart, the 1st Duke of Albany, Earl of Menteith and Fife, is credited with the grandeur of Doune Castle. The younger brother of the notoriously weak King Robert III, canny Albany effectively ran much of Scotland's affairs from Doune, earning him the moniker of 'Scotland's uncrowned king'.

Clockwise from this photo: The annual Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo; one of the search rooms at the ScotlandsPeople Centre; dancers at the Highland Games; Eilean Donan Castle



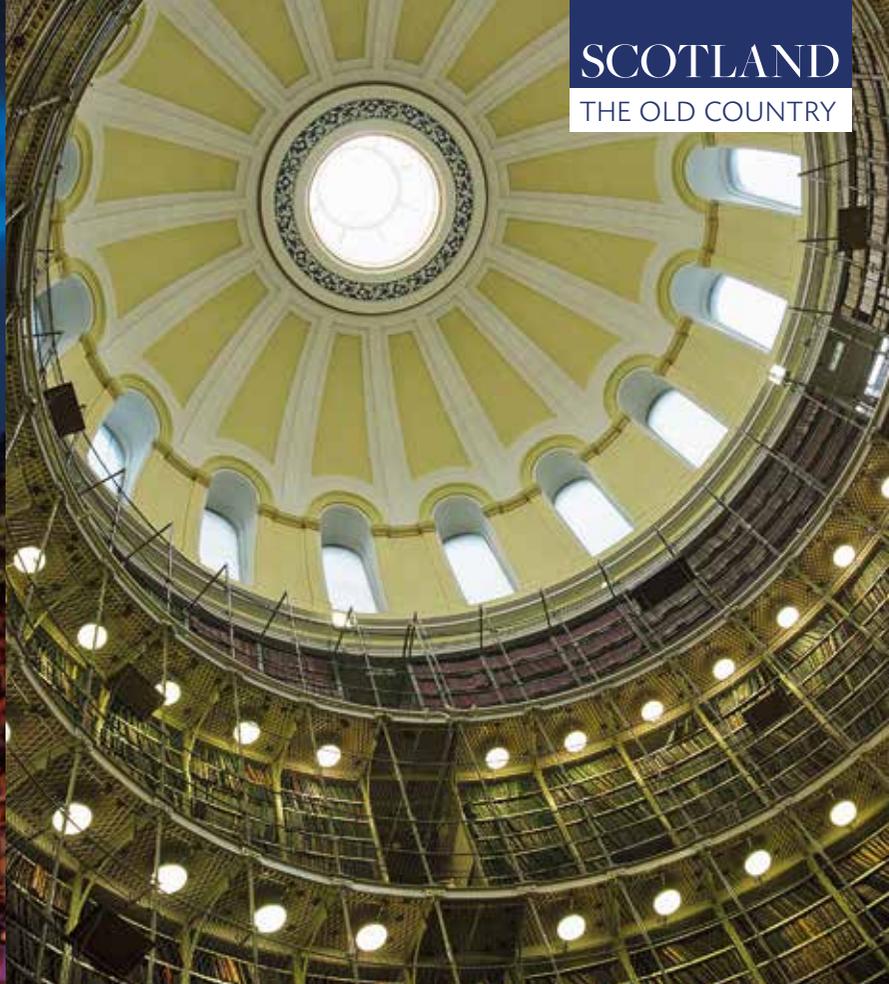
Another pivotal castle in Scotland's history overlooks the Firth of Clyde. Dumbarton Castle towers atop the basalt plug of Dumbarton Rock. It was the ideal buttress against the Viking marauders who harassed the Scottish coast in their longships for centuries. This rugged fortress oozes history: William Wallace was dragged here after his capture in 1305 before his fateful transportation to England, while Mary, Queen of Scots stayed as an infant before being spirited off to France for her own safety. There is even talk of King Arthur's magician Merlin once weaving his magic within its ancient walls.

In Scotland's southern reaches lies one of its most striking castles, Caerlaverock, where a fortress has stood since Roman times. Today's incarnation is jaw-dropping – its unique medieval triangular design includes a moat. Caerlaverock Castle was the seat of the Maxwell clan, whom Alexander II of Scotland entrusted with defence of the kingdom's south-western frontier and it was besieged on a number of occasions. Finally, in 1640, the Maxwells held out for 13 weeks

before finally succumbing and seeing the castle ransacked for the last time. It then, like many of Scotland's castles, fell into retirement as an evocative ruin, much like the beautiful 13th-century Eilean Donan Castle, which was all but destroyed in the Jacobite uprisings before being restored to its former haunting glory in the early 20th century.

Castles sprinkle the 800 or so islands that spread a necklace around Scotland's expansive coastline. The largest of the Inner Hebrides, the Isle of Skye, is typical with a number of fortresses built by different clans. In the south there is Armadale Castle, seat of the Clan Donald, which is still very active today, while in the north you will find the might of Dunvegan, the seat of the Clan MacLeod.

A 20,000-acre estate backs the bulk of Armadale Castle, while the Clan Donald Centre tells the story of the clan through the ages. It also offers extensive genealogy resources for Skye and the north-west Highlands, so it is an essential stop for anyone who may have family members hailing from the area who wants to learn more ►



Walk in the Footsteps of your Ancestors

It may be easy these days to pick up a kilt bedecked in a clan tartan or the coat of arms of one of the great Scottish clans, but what's in a name and where and how do you start tracing your own ancestry?

In Scotland your surname is everything, often indicating not only from which clan you descend, but also from where in the country you come. Confusingly, there can be more than one clan branch: the Stuarts (whose name means 'guardians'), for example, have no official clan chief, but three branches – in southern Scotland, Bute and Appin.

Learning about your own ancestry has never been easier, with a multitude of online resources to help out, though actually coming to Scotland is far more fun and can be more fruitful. If you're lucky you may even get to meet some of your distant relatives.

Once you've gathered old letters, photos and any other traces you may have, head to the ScotlandsPeople Centre in Edinburgh (www.scotlandsppeople.gov.uk), where you can search birth, marriage and death records, wills, census records and coats of arms. Go to www.visitscotland.com/ancestry for clan itineraries and to download your free ancestral guide.



This photo: Moated and twin-towered Caerlaverock Castle. Below: The restored Royal Lodgings inside Stirling Castle



about their ancestry. The Clan MacLeod history is told at the dramatic Dunvegan Castle on Loch Dunvegan, the oldest continuously inhabited castle in Scotland, which has been the ancestral home of the chiefs of the clan for more than 800 years. Among its bountiful treasures is the Fairy Flag, a banner that according to legend is blessed with miraculous powers and when taken into battle will bring victory.

You are in good company visiting Dunvegan as Sir Walter Scott, Dr Johnson, Bonnie Prince Charlie's saviour Flora MacDonald and Queen Elizabeth II are among the luminaries who have delved into the castle and the clan's history here over the centuries.

Gazing out over the chill Atlantic waters myriad other isles await, as well as mainland to the north and south, home to countless other castles of immeasurable stories and interest, each with its own clan histories and legends, just waiting to be explored.

www.visitscotland.com/castles

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