

THE SCOTTISH UNICORN

December 2025

Ignite Your Scottish Spirit

HOGMANAY SPECIAL

When the
Clock Strikes
Midnight,
The World
Sings Burns



First-Footing:
Traditions of Hogmanay

Hang Onto Your Haggis
—Burns Night is Coming Up!



SCOTTISH UNICORN NETWORK

A Wee Note from the Editor

While most December issues brim with holly and Christmas cheer, we've taken a different path — and a distinctly Scottish one - for the December issue of *The Scottish Unicorn*.

For nearly 400 years, Christmas was not celebrated in Scotland at all. Following the Scottish Reformation of 1560 the Kirk banned “Yule” as a Catholic festival. It wasn't until 1958 that Christmas Day became a public holiday in Scotland. That was just 67 years ago!

During those long centuries, Scots poured their festive spirit into the grand celebration of Hogmanay — and, later, into toasting the birthday of Robert Burns on January 25th. In keeping with that tradition, the December issue of *The Scottish Unicorn* celebrates Hogmanay and the legacy of Burns, whose Auld Lang Syne became the anthem of New Year's Eve around the world.

My Scottish grandmother grew up in Maybole. When she and her family sailed for Canada in 1913, they brought with them a plate depicting the Burns Cottage. Luggage space for the crossing must have been scarce – and the fact that this keepsake was included said everything about what Burns meant to them: He represented not just poetry, but humor and heart. Robert Burns was a part of their very identity. And they took great pride in the fact that Scotland's National Poet hailed from their native Ayrshire.

My mother still has that plate, now over 100 years old. It was the inspiration for **Scottish Treasures** – a new feature you can read more about in this issue. You'll also find articles on Hogmanay traditions, the re-imagining of an Ayrshire castle, the meaning of Auld Lang Syne, a primer on Scotland's National Poet and the rituals of a Burns Supper, so that you can confidently raise your toast on January 25th wherever you may be celebrating.

If you've enjoyed this issue of *The Scottish Unicorn*, please share it with another Scot or Friend of Scotland who might welcome a bit of tartan cheer for a cold winter's eve. And as always, please don't hesitate to drop me an email: blyth@scottishunicornnetwork.org with your comments and any ideas for features, including Scottish Treasures and Unicorn Sightings.

May your hearth be bright, your whisky smooth, and your Auld Lang Syne sung with heart.

Blyth Douglas





SCOTTISH TREASURES

Celebrate the Keepsakes of Scottish Heritage

Across Scotland and around the world, families hold dear small mementos that connect them to their roots — a tartan brooch worn by a grandmother, a keepsake clock brought on an ocean voyage, or a lovely souvenir acquired on a memorable Scottish trip to explore family history.

Scottish Treasures is our new series inviting readers to share these cherished heirlooms and the stories behind them — the objects that carry the heart of Scottish heritage across generations.

A Treasure from My Own Family

Our first *Scottish Treasure* comes from my own family — a hand-painted plate depicting **Burns Cottage**, the humble birthplace of Scotland's beloved poet, Robert Burns, in Alloway, Ayrshire.

This plate belonged to my grandmother, who brought it with her to Canada when she emigrated in 1913. She, herself, was an Ayrshire lass.

This little plate hung in her kitchen for decades, a gentle reminder of her Scottish roots and of the enduring spirit of Burns, whose words continue to stir hearts the world over.



Share Your Own Scottish Treasure

Do you have an heirloom, keepsake, or artifact that tells part of your Scottish story?

We'd love to feature it in a future issue of *The Scottish Unicorn* or our Facebook posts. Send us:

- **A photo of your item**
- **A short story** (what it means to you, its family connection or other Scottish connection)
- **Your name and location** (we just use first names and first surname initials)

Please Email: Blyth@scottishunicornnetwork.org or tag us on Facebook at @ScottishUnicornNetwork. We can't wait to see your *Scottish Treasures*!

Together, let's celebrate the keepsakes of Scottish Heritage – one treasure at a time!



The Longest Night: Scotland's Celebration of Hogmanay



After 400 years
without Christmas...

it's no wonder Scots
learned to make *Hogmanay*
the biggest celebration of all!

In the deep midwinter, when the nights stretch long and the air bites with frost, Scotland comes alive with fire.

Torches blaze through cobbled streets, bells ring from old kirks, and the year itself seems to pause — suspended between the darkness that was and the light to come.

This is Hogmanay, Scotland's great winter festival, born from ancient customs, shaped by faith and history, and still pulsing with life centuries later.

A Celebration Born of Darkness



Long before fireworks and ceilidhs, there were bonfires. In pagan Scotland, the winter solstice marked the rebirth of the sun — the promise that darkness would not last forever. Celts celebrated with feasting and flame, and when Norse settlers arrived, they brought their own midwinter rituals of “Yule,” where fire, ale, and song greeted the returning light.

Over time, these ancient observances merged into something distinctively Scottish: a festival not just of light, but of renewal — the symbolic casting out of the old year and the welcoming of the new.

When Christmas Disappeared in Scotland



Few people outside Scotland realize that for nearly four centuries, Christmas itself all but vanished. After the Reformation in 1560, the Presbyterian Kirk condemned Christmas as a “Papist” invention, rife with idleness and excess. Ministers preached sermons on December 25th as if it were any other day, and celebrating the holiday could even lead to punishment.

It wasn't until 1958 that Christmas became a public holiday in Scotland again. By then, generations had poured all their midwinter joy, generosity, and ritual into the turning of the year. The result was Hogmanay — Christmas and New Year rolled into one glorious festival.

In the final days of December, households would “redd the hoose” — sweeping, scrubbing, and settling debts to enter the new year cleansed of the old. At midnight, tables were laid with shortbread, black bun, and whisky, ready to welcome whoever might knock first upon the door.

The Stroke of Midnight: The First-Foot Tradition



The instant the bells rang twelve, the question arose: Who will be the first to cross the threshold? According to tradition, the first-foot — the first visitor to enter a home after midnight — would determine that household's fortune for the coming year.

The most auspicious first-foot was a dark-haired man bearing gifts: a lump of coal for warmth, a bannock or shortbread for sustenance, salt for prosperity, and whisky for good cheer.

The preference for dark hair may reach back to the Viking Age, when the sight of a fair-haired stranger on your doorstep boded ill. Whatever its origins, the ritual remains one of Hogmanay's most cherished customs — a gesture of friendship, luck, and generosity that speaks to the heart of the Scottish spirit.

In towns and villages across the country, people still make their rounds after midnight, knocking on neighbors' doors with bottles in hand, laughter in their breath, and blessings on their tongues. It is an act of community as ancient as it is joyful.

Fire and Fellowship



Everywhere, Hogmanay burns with light. In Stonehaven, fireballs whirl above the heads of brave locals who parade them through the streets, showering sparks into the night sky. In Edinburgh, a river of torches winds down the Royal Mile, linking the city's medieval heart to its volcanic crown.

Fire, in all its forms, symbolizes purification — the burning away of the past and the illumination of what lies ahead. It's a theme as old as the solstice itself: that even in the longest night, light will always return.

The World Joins the Celebration



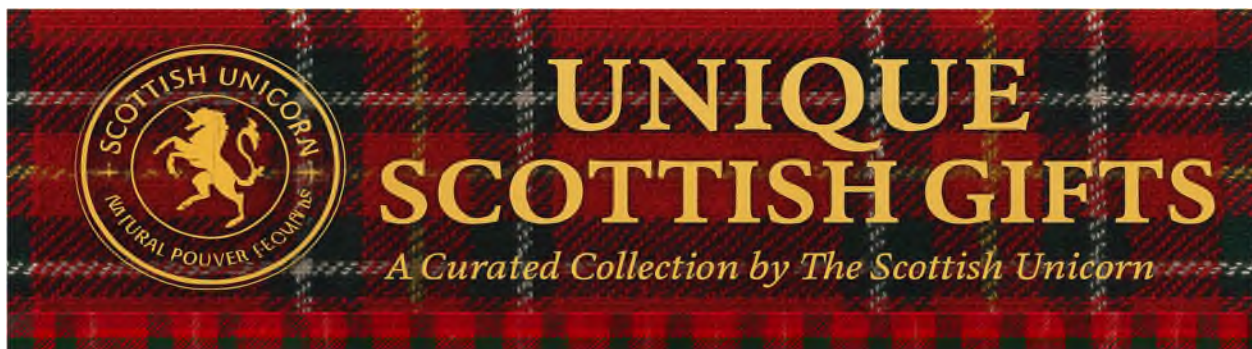
Today, Hogmanay draws visitors from around the world, eager to experience the music, warmth, and spirit that no other New Year's celebration can match. But beneath the fireworks and festivals lies something deeper — a reminder of what Hogmanay has always meant to Scots everywhere.

It is not about spectacle, but connection. About the open door, the outstretched hand, the shared glass.

As the clock strikes twelve and Auld Lang Syne rises once again, Hogmanay carries forward the legacy of centuries — a flame that began in darkness, now lighting hearts across the world.

For on Scotland's longest night, we remember that every ending is also a beginning — and that even the coldest winter can be warmed by friendship, laughter, and the light of new beginnings.





The Scottish Unicorn is pleased to present a curated selection of **Unique Scottish Gifts** for the Holiday Season—inspired by Scotland’s heritage, artistry, and enduring spirit. Each tells its own story: the taste of a buttery shortbread, the pattern of a tartan recalling clan and kinship, the gleam of a handcrafted timepiece, the timeless beauty of a castle rising from the mist. Whether you’re gifting a loved one or treating yourself, these treasures capture the essence of Scotland—to wear, to savor, to read, and to keep. We hope you enjoy our Scottish Gift Guide for 2025!

MacKinnon Watches: Timepieces Woven with Heritage

In the Scottish Highlands, husband-and-wife team **Matt and Belinda MacKinnon** found their inspiration: The pair founded **MacKinnon Watches** (www.mackinnonwatches.com) in 2020 to celebrate Scottish heritage in a distinctly modern way—combining the artistry of traditional tartan weaving with contemporary watch design. Each piece allows its wearer to carry a small heirloom of Scotland with them, wherever life may lead.

MacKinnon Watches are designed and assembled in Scotland using authentic tartans sourced from renowned weaving mills such as **Lochcarron of Scotland** and **House of Edgar**. The result is a collection that feels deeply personal—elegant timepieces that tell stories of clan and legacy. Their specialty lies in **custom tartan timepieces**, where customers can choose from over a thousand authentic tartans to create a watch—or even an Apple Watch strap—that reflects their family heritage or a cherished place.



Image courtesy of MacKinnon Watches

“***Wear your story,***” is the brand’s guiding motto—one that captures the emotional heart of their work. One of their favorite customer stories? A father gifting his son a watch in their clan tartan before he moved abroad: “A reminder that no matter where life takes you, Scotland is always close at hand.” **MacKinnon Watches in three words: Scottish. Authentic. Craftsmanship.** A perfect keepsake for anyone who carries Scotland in their heart—or on their wrist.

MacKinnon Watches ships worldwide, including to the United States (with all customs duties prepaid for a seamless experience). Canadian shipping is also available; DDP to Canada coming soon. Gift packaging and personalized engraving are also offered for those seeking something truly special this Christmas.

The Castles of Scotland: A Masterwork by Martin Coventry



Few books capture the soul of Scotland quite like *The Castles of Scotland*, Martin Coventry's monumental, newly released **sixth edition** of the definitive guide to Scotland's fortified heritage. More than 35 years in the making, this extraordinary volume has become both a beloved treasure for castle enthusiasts and an indispensable reference for researchers, historians, and genealogists searching for their Scottish roots.

Coventry's passion for Scotland's castles began early—not with manicured manor houses or aristocratic estates, but with *ruins*: “battered scenic ruins with a bloody history,” as he recalls.

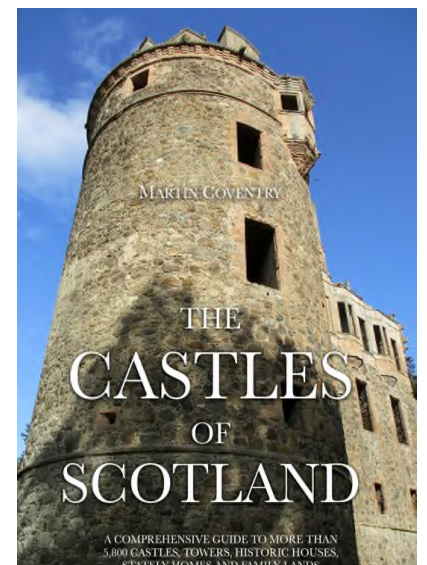
His heart lay with windswept towers, ghost stories, forgotten lairds, and the rugged beauty of places where history clings to every stone. It was during a visit to **Slains Castle**, perched dramatically above the North Sea, that he realized Scotland had no single comprehensive guide to its fortified buildings. “So I decided to compile it,” he says simply.

The first edition appeared in 1995 with just over 1,700 entries. The sixth, published in July 2025, is a vastly expanded achievement—**5,847 entries**, made possible by decades of meticulous research and the growing availability of digitized historical sources.

A lifetime spent exploring Scotland's fortresses has given Coventry many favorites, but one stands out: **Dirleton Castle**, a photogenic East Lothian treasure he's visited more than 30 times: “A beautiful ruin with many chambers, gardens, yew trees, and the most remarkable stories”.

Then there are the ghost stories, none more memorable than the haunting of **Meggernie Castle**, where legend tells of a murdered lady whose spirit wanders in two halves: the upper floors by her torso, the grounds by her legs. Strange? Perhaps. But 19th century witnesses who recorded seeing her even described receiving a “burning kiss” from the spectral upper half.

Beautiful, immersive, and exquisitely researched, *The Castles of Scotland* is more than a book—it is a journey into the heart of Scotland's past. **A perfect gift for those who cherish Scottish heritage or dream of exploring its ancient stones.** The sixth edition is available worldwide at: www.thecastlesofscotland.co.uk/purchase Or contact Martin directly at martin@thecastlesofscotland.co.uk Hardback: £65 UK / approx. \$105 US



All images courtesy of Martin Coventry

The Lady Row Collection: A Modern Tribute to the First Lady of Baltersan Castle

In the rolling countryside near Maybole, where the ruins of **Baltersan Castle** stand against the Ayrshire sky, a new kind of legacy is taking shape. It comes not from stone or mortar, but from silver and design — a modern tribute to the castle’s first lady and Scotland’s enduring spirit of craftsmanship and grace.

The **Lady Row Collection** takes its name from **Egidia Blair, Lady Row**, who lived and died on these lands in the early 1500s. The eldest daughter of John Blair of that Ilk, Egidia was remembered for her generosity and her far-seeing mind. Her will, written in 1530, endowed local churches, helped fund the building of a bridge across the River Girvan, and provided alms for the poor. In a time when women’s influence was often confined to hearth and chapel, Lady Row’s philanthropy left a tangible mark on her community — including the small “Lady’s Chapel” added to nearby Crossraguel Abbey after her death.



*Scallop Pendant
(Matching earrings also available)*

It is this spirit of *giving back* that inspired **Angelo Ovidi**, custodian of Baltersan Castle, to create a jewelry line that would both honor her and help fund the castle’s rebirth. Each piece in the collection is a fusion of elegance and purpose — a wearable link between Scotland’s past and its future.

Crafted with meticulous care, the designs draw inspiration from 16th-century motifs found in Baltersan’s stonework: quatrefoils, interlaced hearts, and stylized fleur-de-lys.

“Lady Row represents the best of Scottish heritage,” says Ovidi. “She reminds us that history isn’t just about castles and battles — it’s about compassion, creativity, and continuity. We wanted the jewelry to capture that.”

Sales from the Lady Row Collection directly support the **Baltersan Restoration Fund**, which aims to rebuild the castle as a cultural and artistic haven. (You can read about Baltersan’s rebirth in our feature article later in this issue: “*There’s More History in Ayrshire than Burns – Reimagining a 16th-Century Castle*”.)

Each purchase becomes both a keepsake and a contribution: an ornament with a purpose. Pieces range from pendants and earrings to limited-edition brooches, all beautifully presented with heritage-themed packaging and available worldwide through the Baltersan Castle Website: [Lady Row Collection – Baltersan 1584](#) To wear something from the Lady Row Collection is to carry a fragment of that story — a small gleam of Ayrshire history reborn.



Angel Pendant with Pearl

All images courtesy of Angelo Ovidi, Laird of Baltersan.

Walker's Shortbread – Scotland's Sweetest Tradition



Over a century ago, in 1898, 21-year-old **Joseph Walker** opened a small bakery in the Speyside village of Aberlour with a single ambition: **To bake the world's finest shortbread** (www.walkersshortbread.com – website toggles UK/US sites).

Armed with a £50 loan and an unwavering commitment to quality, Joseph perfected a recipe made with only **four simple ingredients—flour, butter, sugar and salt**—which remains the foundation of Walker's Shortbread to this day. His skill and reputation quickly spread. Local shooting parties began making detours to his bakery, while word of his famously rich shortbread travelled throughout the Highlands. By the 1930s, Joseph's sons James and Joseph joined the business, introducing delivery vans, expanding production, and helping the bakery grow into a beloved regional brand.

In the decades that followed, **Walker's remained proudly family-owned**, with each generation bringing new capabilities while safeguarding tradition. The third generation modernised operations, expanded product lines, and built on the brand's tartan-wrapped identity—instantly recognizable to customers worldwide. Today, the fourth generation of the Walker family continues to lead the company, ensuring that the brand's values, craftsmanship, and sense of place remain at its core.



All images courtesy of Walker's Shortbread

From its roots in Aberlour to global distribution in more than 100 countries, **Walker's Shortbread has become one of Scotland's most iconic exports**. Despite its international reach, the company continues to bake in its home village, using the same principles Joseph Walker established more than 125 years ago: **Natural ingredients, uncompromising quality, and pride in every batch.**

ScotlandShop: Weaving Heritage into Modern Style

Born in the Scottish Borders in 2002, **ScotlandShop** (www.scotlandshop.com) began with founder Anna White's vision to blend traditional craftsmanship with contemporary design — connecting people around the world to their Scottish roots through the timeless beauty of tartan.

From its earliest days, the brand has celebrated Scotland's rich textile heritage while supporting local makers and rural communities. Each piece in their collection carries the colors and patterns of clan and kinship into the modern world — living proof that tartan never goes out of style.



ScotlandShop's story is also a transatlantic one. Their first retail store opened in Edinburgh in 2017, soon followed by a tour of North America that took them from New York's Tartan Week to Highland Games across the U.S. and Canada. That journey inspired their first overseas home in **Albany, New York** — a city whose name itself comes from Alba, the Gaelic word for Scotland. To mark the occasion, they designed the official Albany Tartan, now proudly worn at weddings, curling events, and celebrations throughout the New York Capital Region.

For the holiday season, **ScotlandShop's** collection offers an abundance of tartan treasures —



from personalized Christmas stockings to festive garlands, tree skirts, and Santa hats that bring a cozy Scottish spirit to any home.

Their tableware and décor lines make gatherings feel even warmer, while embroidered touches add a heartfelt, handmade feel.

Today, with stores in Crieff, Edinburgh, and Albany, **ScotlandShop** continues to embody what it means to be a modern Scottish brand: rooted in tradition, inspired by innovation, and devoted to helping people around the world wear their story in tartan.

All images courtesy of ScotlandShop

When the Clock Strikes Midnight:



The World Sings Burns

The final seconds of the year slip away. Crowds press close together under the winter sky. In Edinburgh, fireworks blaze above the Castle. In Glasgow, laughter and song spill into the streets. From Toronto to Tokyo, from Melbourne to Miami, people join hands and lift their voices in a melody older than memory — *“Should auld acquaintance be forgot...”*

It’s the moment the whole world becomes a little bit Scottish.

The Song That Belongs to Everyone

When Robert Burns first put pen to paper in 1788, he wasn’t trying to write a New Year’s anthem for the world. He was preserving something older — a fragment of an ancient Scots folk tune that had been passed down by word of mouth. Burns refined and reshaped it, giving it a rhythm and language that could be sung. The phrase “auld lang syne” literally means “old long since” — or, as we might say today, “days gone by.”

It’s a simple idea, yet profoundly human: when we sing it, we honor the friendships, memories, and moments that shaped us. That’s why the song feels as natural at a farewell as it does at New Year’s — it isn’t really about time passing, but about what endures.

Auld Lang Syne and the Scottish New Year

In Scotland, the New Year — or Hogmanay — long eclipsed Christmas as the country's chief winter celebration, a legacy of centuries when the Kirk forbade the observance of Christmas. (You'll find that remarkable story earlier in this issue.) Families swept their hearths clean, paid their debts, and prepared to start fresh. And when midnight struck, neighbors crossed thresholds with gifts of coal, shortbread, and whisky — the ancient custom known as first-footing. And inevitably, voices rose together in song.

What began as a local custom soon became a global ritual. Scots carried it with them wherever they went — across oceans, across generations. And in doing so, they gave the world its New Year's song.

How the World Learned to Sing Burns

The spread of Auld Lang Syne beyond Scotland is a story of diaspora and music. In the 19th century, emigrant Scots brought the tune to every corner of the British Empire — from Canada to Australia, from India to the Caribbean. It appeared in military regiments, church services, and later, in gatherings of Scots abroad who longed for home.

But the real turning point came in the early 20th century when Guy Lombardo, the Canadian bandleader from London, Ontario, began performing Auld Lang Syne with his orchestra at midnight broadcasts from New York's Roosevelt Hotel.

By the 1940s, his radio show had become the soundtrack of New Year's Eve for millions of Americans — and, eventually, for the entire English-speaking world.



From that moment on, Burns's humble poem was no longer just Scottish — it was universal.

A Song of Parting and Promise

There's a curious power in the melody. You don't have to know the words; you just have to know the feeling. People who've never set foot in Scotland find themselves swaying arm-in-arm at midnight, singing a song they've half-forgotten but somehow know by heart.

It's the perfect mix of nostalgia and hope — that sweet ache of remembering what we've lost while believing in what lies ahead. For one brief moment, the divisions of language, class, and country dissolve. The song binds us in the oldest human ritual there is: saying goodbye, together.



*"And there's a hand, my trusty fiere,
And gie's a hand o' thine;
And we'll tak a right guid-willie waught,
For auld lang syne."
— Auld Lang Syne, 1788*

Roughly translated: "So here's my hand, my trusted friend, and give me yours; let's share a goodwill drink for old times' sake."

Few lines in world literature capture camaraderie more simply or sincerely.

When the Clock Strikes Twelve

When midnight comes to Scotland, it joins a chorus that began hours earlier in Sydney and Tokyo and rolls westward through London, New York, and Vancouver. In Edinburgh, torches blaze through the streets in the great Hogmanay procession, the bells of St. Giles ring out, and fireworks crown the Castle as a river of people sing, laugh, and hold each other close. Across time zones and continents, the same words echo — a single song chasing the sunrise around the world.

In Tokyo, revelers sing it as *Hotaru no Hikari*, with different lyrics but the same haunting tune. In Nova Scotia, it's played at curling clubs and small-town gatherings. In New York, it rings out over Times Square. In Scotland, it fills the air like a benediction.

It is the world's shared heartbeat of Hogmanay — a moment of connection that owes its pulse to a Scottish ploughman-poet who understood, better than anyone, that friendship and memory are the true measure of time.



The Gift That Burns Gave the World

What makes *Auld Lang Syne* extraordinary isn't that it belongs to Scotland. It's that Scotland gave it away. The song has no borders, no barriers. Whether sung in Scots, English, Japanese, or French, it carries the same human truth — that we are shaped by the people we've known, and the kindness we've shared.

Burns may never have imagined his verse circling the globe, yet perhaps he would have smiled to know that at the turning of every year, millions pause to sing his words — raising their voices for "auld lang syne," for friendship, for memory, and for hope renewed.

So when the clock strikes midnight this Hogmanay, join hands — wherever you are — and sing with the world. Because for a few shining minutes, through the poetry of one Scottish voice, we are all united in the same song.

Robert Burns: Scotland's Poet of the People



Before he became an icon, Robert Burns was a farmer's son from Ayrshire — a man who ploughed by day and wrote poetry by candlelight. His was a life of contradictions: rustic and refined, disciplined and reckless, tender and tempestuous. Yet it is precisely these contradictions that made him unforgettable. Burns embodied the very soul of Scotland — proud, passionate, and profoundly human.

Born in 1759 in the small village of Alloway, Burns grew up in a modest home his father built with his own hands. William Burnes, a tenant farmer, was a man of principle and learning who believed that his children's minds should be richer than his fields. From him, Robert inherited both a fierce work ethic and a restless imagination. Books were scarce, but words became his wealth.

At twenty-seven, Burns's first collection, ***Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect***, made him famous overnight. Edinburgh's literary world

hailed him as a "Heaven-taught ploughman," though the label carried more condescension than praise. He was courted by noblemen, toasted by society ladies, and painted by Alexander Nasmyth in a portrait that still defines him. Yet fame sat uneasily upon his shoulders; he remained, at heart, a countryman — more at ease in a tavern than a drawing room.

Love, Passion, and Scandal

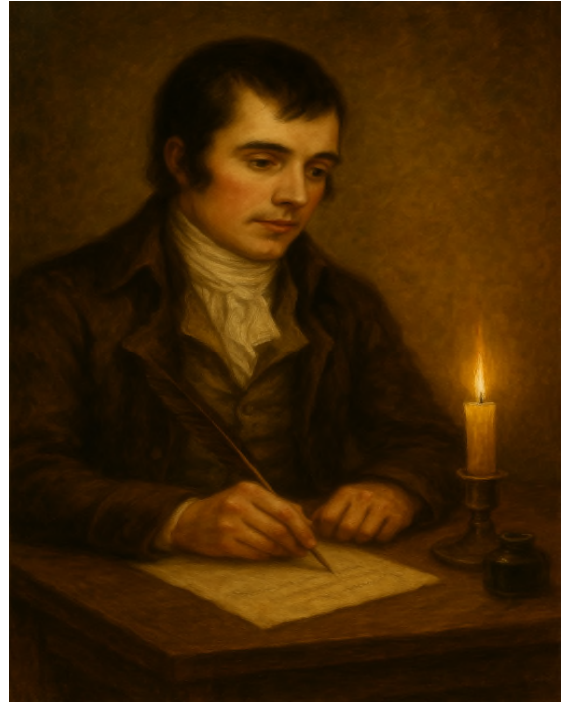
If his verses throbbed with feeling, so did his life. Burns's romantic adventures were legendary and often disastrous. Jean Armour, the daughter of a respected stonemason, was his great love — and his great scandal. When she became pregnant with twins before they were married, her father destroyed their marriage contract in outrage. Burns fled briefly, nursing heartbreak and humiliation. Yet he could never stay away for long; he returned, reconciled with Jean, and they eventually wed, their union producing nine children, though only three survived infancy.

Then there was Highland Mary — Mary Campbell — whom Burns met around 1786. She was young, devout, and perhaps the one woman who stirred something purer than desire in him. They exchanged Bibles at the banks of the River Ayr. Weeks later, she died suddenly, likely of typhus. Burns was shattered. Years later, he poured his grief into verse:

*"Thou lingering star, with lessening ray,
That lov'st to greet the early morn,
Again thou usher'st in the day
My Mary from my soul was torn."
— To Mary in Heaven, 1792*

His passion never cooled. He flirted shamelessly and wrote love poems to women from every walk of life — barmaids, society ladies, even Edinburgh hostesses. Yet his songs of affection, tenderness, and loss continue to resonate because they spring from something universal: the way love ennobles and wounds us all.

*"Ae fond kiss, and then we sever;
Ae fareweel, alas, for ever!"
— Ae Fond Kiss, 1791*



Fame and Frustration

Burns's moment in the Edinburgh spotlight was brief. The salons and societies that had fawned over him soon tired of the novelty of a farmer-poet. Disillusioned, he returned to rural life — to the backbreaking labor of farming, where one failed harvest followed another. Debt haunted him. In the end, he accepted a position as an excise officer — collecting taxes for the Crown, a stable but ironic occupation for a man who had written so passionately about liberty and equality.

Yet even as he trudged from tavern to tavern inspecting whisky barrels, the poet's pen never rested. His song ***A Man's a Man for A' That*** championed the dignity of ordinary people and the equality of all humankind.

*"The rank is but the guinea's stamp,
The man's the gowd for a' that."
— A Man's a Man for A' That, 1795*

Fame brought neither fortune nor peace. At one point, facing ruin, Burns even contemplated seeking work abroad — in Jamaica, where the plantations ran on slave labor. Whether he truly meant to go or merely dreamed of escape remains uncertain, but the idea shows how deeply despair had set in.

*The best-laid
schemes o' mice
an' men
Gang aft agley.*



—To a Mouse, 1785

The Shadow and the Light

Burns was no saint. He could be impulsive, vain, and self-destructive. Yet his humanity was his genius. He understood the frailty and nobility in every soul — farmer or lord, lass or laird.

His empathy extended to all living things. When he disturbed a mouse's nest with his plough, he wrote not in jest but in genuine remorse:

*"The best-laid schemes o' mice an' men
Gang aft agley."*

— To a Mouse, 1785

That single line has echoed across centuries, even lending its rhythm to the title of American writer John Steinbeck's classic novel, *Of Mice and Men*. It is the voice of compassion, distilled.

Burns at His Wry Best

In one of his most playful works, "*To a Louse*" (1786), Robert Burns spies a tiny intruder crawling across the bonnet of a finely dressed lady in church.

With typical Burnsian mischief, he addresses the creature directly — skewering vanity and pretension while reminding us of our shared humanity.

*O wad some Pow'r the giftie gie us
To see oursels as ithers see us!*

Roughly translated: "Oh, would some Power give us the gift to see ourselves as others see us!"

A simple moment of embarrassment, turned into eternal wisdom — only Burns could make that leap.

BURNS AT HIS WRY BEST: The Poem About a Louse



*O wad some
Pow'r the giftie
gie us
To see oursels
as ithers see us!*

'To a Louse'



A Legacy Without Borders

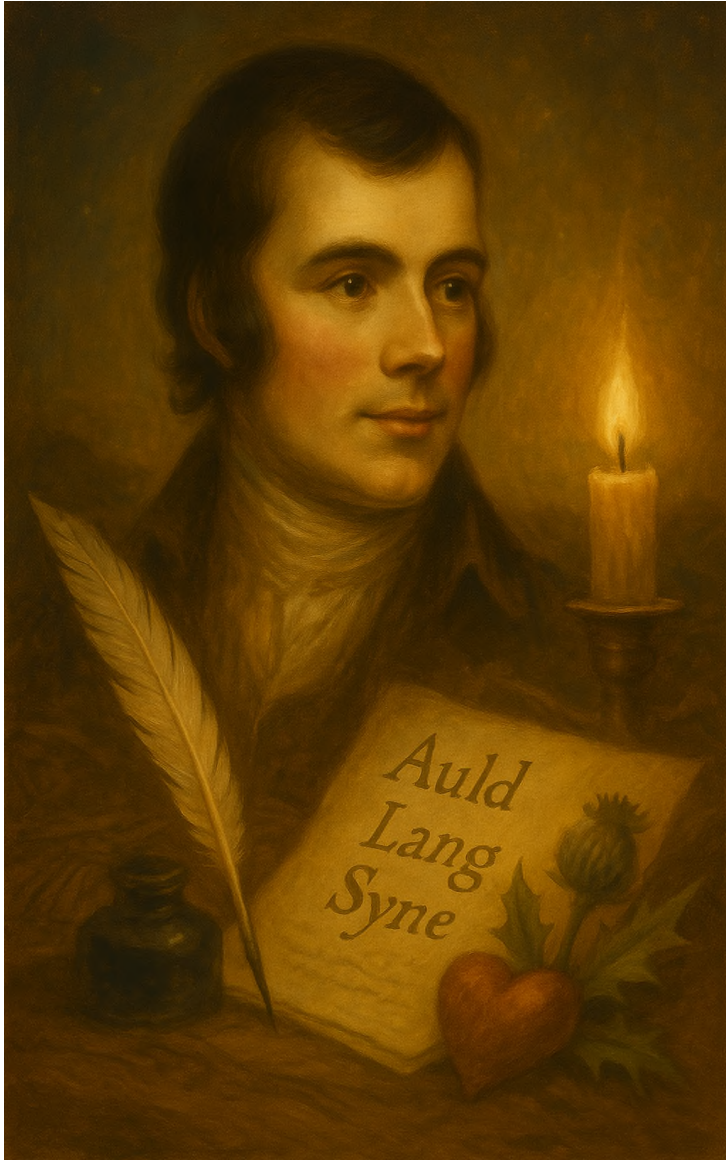


Burns died young — only 37 — his body worn out by illness and strain. Yet his words lived on, carried first by Scots abroad and later by a world hungry for sincerity. His influence stretched far beyond the moors of Ayrshire. Across the Atlantic, Abraham Lincoln was said to carry Burns's poems in his coat pocket and could recite ***Tam o' Shanter*** from memory. The ploughman's voice, born in a humble cottage, reached the White House itself.

Every January 25th, Scots and friends of Scotland gather to honor him at Burns Suppers — evenings of poetry, laughter, and fellowship that have become a cultural treasure. ***The Selkirk Grace***, the ***Address to a Haggis***, and the immortal toasts to “the Lassies” and “the Laddies” are part of a living ritual that celebrates not perfection but passion — the kind that lights the human heart.

More than two centuries later, Robert Burns remains a poet for the people because he was one of them. His life was as rough and radiant as the land he loved. And while the salons of Edinburgh have faded into dust, the warmth of his words endures — sung in kitchens, taverns, and ballrooms around the world each Hogmanay, when friends join hands and raise their voices for ***Auld Lang Syne***.

Hang Onto Your Haggis: The Rituals of a Burns Supper



A Feast of Poetry, Tradition and Good Company

Every January 25th, candlelight flickers across dining halls, tartans gleam, and the sound of the pipes rises like a heartbeat.

Glasses are raised, laughter ripples through the air, and one name is spoken with warmth and pride: Robert Burns.

For more than two centuries, Scots and friends of Scotland around the world have gathered to honor their national poet in the most fitting way possible — with food, fellowship, and verse. A Burns Supper isn't a solemn occasion; It's a joyous celebration of poetry, wit, and shared humanity.

How It All Began

The Burns Supper tradition began modestly enough. In July 1801, five years after Burns's death, nine of his friends met at his birthplace in Alloway to mark his birthday and pay tribute to the man they loved and admired.

They dined on haggis and sheep's head, read from his works, and toasted his memory late into the night.

What they began that evening became one of Scotland's most enduring cultural rituals. Within decades, Burns Clubs sprang up across the country — and around the world — each one keeping the flame of his words alive through annual suppers filled with laughter, stories, and song.

The Order of the Evening

Though every Burns Supper is somewhat unique, most follow a well-loved pattern that blends reverence with humor and a fair bit of whisky. The evening usually begins with the **Piping in of the Guests**, as a piper greets arrivals with rousing marches that set the tone. Then comes the **Selkirk Grace**, a short, humble prayer attributed to Burns:

*“Some hae meat and canna eat,
And some wad eat that want it;
But we hae meat and we can eat,
And sae the Lord be thankit.”*

Then comes the moment everyone’s been waiting for: the **Piping in of the Haggis**.

A procession forms as the haggis is carried proudly into the room, accompanied by a piper and thunderous applause.

The master of ceremonies recites Burns’s famous “**Address to a Haggis**,” beginning with the immortal line:

*“Fair fa’ your honest, sonsie face,
Great chieftain o’ the pudding-race!”*

At the climactic moment, the haggis is dramatically cut open with a knife — a theatrical gesture that never fails to draw cheers. What follows is a hearty meal of haggis, neeps, and tatties, washed down with whisky and good humor. Then, amid laughter and clinking glasses, come the toasts and tributes that make each supper its own.

The **Immortal Memory** is the centerpiece: A speech honoring Burns’s life, work, and enduring influence. Some are scholarly; others are light-hearted. But all reflect the same affection for a man whose words still move hearts more than two centuries later.

Next comes the **Toast to the Lassies**, a playful salute to the women present — humorous, affectionate, and often filled with mock gallantry. The **Reply from the Lassies** answers in kind, with wit and good-natured teasing that keeps the room roaring with laughter.

Between courses and speeches, guests take turns reciting or singing Burns’s works — *A Man’s a Man for A’ That*, *Tam o’ Shanter*, *Ae Fond Kiss*, and of course, *Auld Lang Syne*.





A Global Tradition

What began in a small cottage in Ayrshire now spans continents.

Today, Burns Suppers are held everywhere from Edinburgh to Edmonton, Dunedin to Dubai. Some are grand formal banquets; others are intimate gatherings of friends around a kitchen table. But wherever they take place, the heart of the evening remains the same: Shared pride, shared laughter, and a shared love of Scotland's bard.

In New York, Sydney and Singapore, Scottish societies host glittering dinners complete with pipers, dancers, and tartan aplenty. In tiny rural halls across the Highlands, neighbors still gather with mugs and fiddles, reciting the same lines their ancestors once did.

And in countless homes around the world, descendants of Scots raise a glass to the poet whose words still make them feel connected to the land of their forebears.

The Meaning Beneath the Merriment

For all the pomp and playfulness, a Burns Supper is more than a feast — it's a celebration of values that run deep in Scottish culture: friendship, equality, and compassion.

Burns's poetry gave voice to the ordinary person. He wrote of farmers and ploughmen, of love and loss, of human dignity and the fleeting beauty of life. His was a democratic spirit— and his words remind us that wit, warmth, and humanity are worth toasting, year after year.

So, when the whisky flows and the laughter rises this January, remember what it's really about. It's not the haggis or the speeches — it's the connection between people, the power of words to bind hearts, and the joy of lifting a glass together in a celebration of life, itself.

Or, as Burns himself might say:

***"Here's a bottle and an honest friend!
What wad ye wish for mair, man?
Wha kens, before his life may end,
What his share may be o' care, man?"***





Edinburgh – Jan 23 & 24

The Royal Yacht Britannia

<https://tinyurl.com/4z5er9x4>

Falkland (Fife) – Jan 24

Falkland Palace & Gardens

<https://tinyurl.com/t8tv2x7x>

Dunblane (Stirling) – Jan 30

Burns Club Centenary Burns Supper

[2026 Burns Supper - Dunblane Burns Club](#)

Ayr – Jan 23

Ayrshire Hospice Burns Supper

Brig O' Doon Hotel

[Burns Supper - Ayrshire Hospice](#)

Glasgow – Jan 25

The Citizen: Burns Supper

[Burns Supper — The Citizen](#)

Aberdeen – Jan 23 & 24

Burns Ceilidh Supper

[Burns Ceilidh Supper | Aberdeen City Council](#)



Winnipeg, MB – Date TBD

St. Andrew's Society of Winnipeg

[The St. Andrew's Society of Winnipeg](#)

Toronto, ON – Jan 23

St. Andrew's Society of Toronto

[2026 Burns Dinner • St. Andrew's Society of Toronto](#)

Montreal, QC – Date TBD

St. Andrew's Society of Montreal

<https://www.standrews.qc.ca>

Ottawa, ON – Jan 24

Scottish Society of Ottawa

[The Scottish Society of Ottawa](#)

Calgary, AB – Jan 23

50th Annual Burns Supper

<https://www.calgaryburnsclub.com>

Edmonton, AB – Jan 31

Edmonton Scottish Society- Burns Pub Night

www.edmontonscottishsociety.org

Halifax, NS – Jan 24

Halifax Burns Club Supper

[Halifax Burns Club | Robert Burns Club](#)



UNITED STATES BURNS SUPPERS 2026

New York City, NY – Jan 16

American Scottish Foundation

Burns Supper at The University Club

www.americanscottishfoundation.com

Washington, DC – Date TBD

St. Andrew's Society of Washington DC

[Burns Night – St. Andrew's Society of](#)

[Washington, DC](#)

Atlanta, GA – Date TBD

Burns Club of Atlanta

[The Burns Club of Atlanta - Celebrating Robert](#)

[Burns | The Burns Club of Atlanta](#)

Cincinnati, OH – Date TBD

Caledonian Society of Cincinnati

[Events — The Caledonian Society of Cincinnati](#)

Augusta, Maine – Jan 17

St. Andrew's Society of Maine

[Saint Andrew's Society of Maine](#)

Rumford, Maine – Jan 24

(Official) Scottish Society of Maine

<https://tinyurl.com/dxhnpzyf>

Fort Lauderdale, FL – Jan 24

Scottish American Society of South Florida

[Scottish American Society of South Florida -](#)

[Burns Supper](#)

Dallas / Fort Worth, TX – Jan 24

CowTown Scots

<https://www.cowtownscots.org>

New Orleans, LA – Jan 17

Caledonian Society of New Orleans

<https://www.caledoniansocietyofneworleans>

[.com/activities.html](#)

Shreveport/Minden, LA – Jan 24

Scottish Society of the Louisiana Highlands

[\(7\) Scottish Society of the Louisiana Highlands |](#)

[Facebook](#)

Stow, OH – Jan 23

Burns Night, Ohio Scottish American Society

[Ohio Scottish American Society](#)

Reno, NV – Jan 31

Nevada Society of Scottish Clans

[Robert Burns Celebration Details | NVSSC](#)

Los Angeles, CA – Jan 24

St. Andrew's Society of Los Angeles

Robert Burns Supper

<https://tinyurl.com/9rw8cr2u>

San Francisco, CA – Date TBD

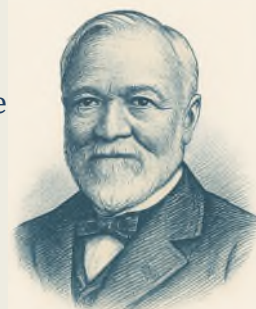
St. Andrew's Society of San Francisco

[Scottish Tradition & Heritage | St. Andrew's](#)

[Society](#)

Spotlight: Burns Night at New York's University Club

In the grand dining room of the very building where negotiations for U.S. Steel were struck in 1901 — securing Andrew Carnegie's place as one of America's greatest industrialists — the American-Scottish Foundation now hosts its annual Burns Supper. Guests dine beneath gilded ceilings where the echoes of history meet the songs of Scotland, toasting the Bard in true New York style.





AUSTRALIA & NEW ZEALAND BURNS SUPPERS 2026

Sydney, Australia – Jan 24

Institute of Chartered Accounts of Scotland
Sydney Harbour

[ICAS Sydney Burns Night 2026: Honouring our
Scottish roots - ICAS](#)

Perth, Australia – Jan 23

(Dance practices - Jan 6, 13 and 20)

St. Andrew Society of WA Burns Supper

[Upcoming Events - Saint Andrew Society of
Western Australia](#)

Brisbane, Australia – Jan 23

Society of St. Andrew of Scotland Queensland
[Society of St Andrew of Scotland Queensland](#)

Dunedin, New Zealand – Jan 25

Dunedin Folk Club

<https://tinyurl.com/mruesj93>

Arrowton, New Zealand – Jan 24

Athanaeum Hall

[2026 Arrowtown Burns Supper & Ceilidh](#)

OTHER LOCATIONS THROUGHOUT THE WORLD



London, UK – Jan 23

The Caledonian Club Burns Supper

<https://www.caledonianclub.com>

Oman – Jan 24

Caledonian Society of Oman

<https://www.facebook.com/CaledonianSocietyOman>

Kenya – Date TBD

Caledonian Society of Kenya

<https://caledoniakenya.com/>

Bermuda – Date TBD

Caledonian Society of Bermuda

<https://caledoniansocietybermuda.com/>

Singapore – Jan 24

Singapore St. Andrew's Society

<https://www.standrews.org.sg>

Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia – Jan 31

Selangor St. Andrew's Society

[Selangor St. Andrew's Society | Scottish Society
Malaysia](#)



UNICORN SIGHTINGS

Celebrate the National Animal of Scotland

From regal statues to beloved keepsakes, Scotland's National Animal appears in the most unexpected places — a reminder of wonder, courage, and a touch of Scottish magic wherever it's found.

We invited our readers to share their own *Unicorn Sightings* — and the response was delightful!

Here are a few of our favorites:



First Unicorn Sighting

Bob M. of Barberton, Ohio launched our series with this magnificent unicorn he spotted on a trip to Inverness last spring.



Photo credit: D. Grasley-McHenry

Most Enchanting

Debra S.G. shared this magical photo of her grand-daughter Maraya with her first unicorn in Berwick, Pennsylvania.



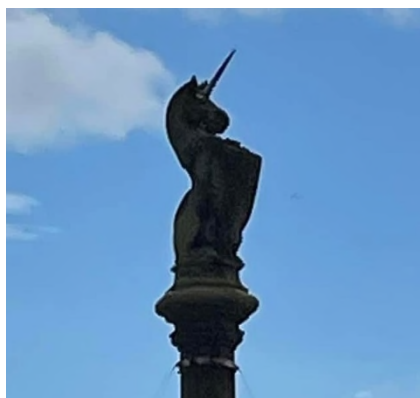
Most Charming Back Story

This commemorative plate acquired by Becky F's parents on their honeymoon in Niagara Falls remains one of her most treasured keepsakes — a lasting reminder of her parents' love story.



Facebook Favorite

Amy F's *Unicorn Sighting* comes from Barrie, Ontario — where her beautiful husky loves to snuggle with Scotland's National Animal.



Most Dignified

This noble unicorn — beautifully captured by Wendi C of Texas - keeps watch over Glasgow.

This Holiday Season, keep your eyes open.

From snowmen to slippers, you never know where Scotland's National Animal might appear.

Send your *Unicorn Sighting* to blyth@scottishunicornnetwork.org for a chance to be featured in our next issue.

There's More History in Ayrshire than Burns: *Reimagining a 16th-Century Castle*

When most people think of Ayrshire, they think of Robert Burns — the poet whose words still echo from Alloway to the far corners of the Scottish world. But venture a few miles south of Maybole, and you'll find another kind of poetry rising from the stones — at **Baltersan Castle**, a 16th-century tower house now being lovingly reimagined for the 21st century.



Built in 1584 for **John Kennedy of Pennyglen** and his wife **Margaret Cathcart**, Baltersan stands on land once owned by **Egidia Blair, Lady Row**, a woman renowned in her day for philanthropy and vision.

The castle's silhouette — roofless yet resolute — looks across to the ruins of **Crossraguel Abbey**, where Abbot Quintin Kennedy once faced John Knox in a clash of conviction that helped shape Scotland's Reformation. History lingers thick in the Ayrshire air, and Baltersan has long seemed to wait for someone to listen.

That listener arrived from an unexpected place.

“This is a fantastic place and I’m excited to become its custodian. Baltersan is more than stone and mortar — it’s an idea of what Scotland means to the world.”

-Angelo Ovidi

In 2024, **Angelo Ovidi**, an Italian computer engineer based in North Wales, became **Laird of Baltersan** — or as he prefers to say, the castle’s “modern custodian.” Captivated by Scotland’s architectural romance and by Baltersan’s quiet dignity, he set out not merely to stabilize the ruin but to **bring it back to life**. His vision? To restore Baltersan as a *living* heritage site — part arts venue, part retreat, part celebration of Scotland’s enduring spirit.

Ovidi’s plans draw inspiration from the award-winning restoration of **Fairburn Tower**, another 16th-century ruin resurrected through the National Trust for Scotland’s “Historic Houses Revival” program. Like Fairburn, Baltersan’s project combines conservation craftsmanship with creative reinvention — a castle reborn not as museum piece, but as a place of music, art, and storytelling.

Early drone footage shows the potential: the walls rising from winter mist, the angles of the stair-tower sharp against low Ayrshire light, a landscape once again ready to welcome life within its walls.

The new **Baltersan 1584** website ([Baltersan 1584 – Baltersan Castle](#)) shares both progress and purpose — inviting the world to follow the restoration and support it through heritage-inspired designs and a distinctive product line whose proceeds help fund the next phase of work, including jewelry inspired by **Lady Row**, as featured in our *Unique Scottish Gifts Guide*.



Reimagined image of Baltersan Castle after reconstruction



For those with Ayrshire roots, Baltersan represents something profoundly local yet universally resonant: *the rediscovery of a place that never truly disappeared*. Its revival feels personal — especially to those, like this editor, whose own ancestors once walked Maybole’s streets.

There really is more history in Ayrshire than Burns — though even Burns might have been enchanted by Baltersan’s story. After all, he knew that the past lives on in those who refuse to let it fade.

All images courtesy of Angelo Ovidi, Laird of Baltersan.



Coming Soon.....

The Scottish Unicorn is a brand new, bi-monthly publication of the Scottish Unicorn Network. Our website is still under construction (www.scottishunicornnetwork.org), so please email our editor: blyth@scottishunicornnetwork.org to sign up for future issues. Scots are famously thrifty, so don't worry – they're free!

And don't hesitate to email this copy to a friend who might enjoy it – or to members of your Clan or Scottish Society. They may just buy you a wee dram for sharing.....

Here's a look at what lies ahead in the months to come:

February/March Issue

This issue is all about romance - including the sizzling scandals of the beautiful Mary, Queen of Scots, some of which ended in murder.

And we'll feature Sir Walter Scott's most famous novel, *Ivanhoe* – which poses the question many a Scotsman surely contemplated over a wee dram: “Rowena or Rebecca?” (the 19th century equivalent of “Ginger or MaryAnne?”). Who knew that a bored Scottish lawyer had such passion in his blood?

If you've not read or seen *Ivanhoe*, there are many films and TV series that portray Scott's famous work. Check it out before our February issue arrives in your Inbox!



April/May Issue

National Unicorn Day is celebrated in Scotland on April 9th – so this issue focuses on Scotland's National Animal. It's filled with unicorn trivia: How did this mythical creature become the emblem of Scotland? Why is the unicorn depicted with a chain in some royal coats of arms – but the chain is broken in others?

We'll explore the famous unicorn tapestries at Stirling Castle in Scotland, the Cloisters in New York and the Cluny Museum in Paris. Why were these beautiful works created? What do they symbolize? Why are they still so beloved today?

And of course we'll feature YOUR unicorn sightings. Be sure to send your photos of Scotland's National Animal by March 1st to: blyth@scottishunicornnetwork.org.

Follow *The Scottish Unicorn Network* on Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/scottishunicornnetwork>

HAPPY HOLIDAYS



The SCOTTISH
UNICORN
NETWORK