

ABERDEENSHIRE

Phil Astley, City Archivist for Aberdeen, shows us what the county's heritage sector is doing to help ancestral tourists find routes to their North-East roots

THE HEADQUARTERS of the Aberdeen and North East Scotland Family History Society is a magnet for ancestor hunters with roots in this part of Scotland. During the summer months especially, it is usual for the lilt of American, Canadian, Australian and indeed English accents to be heard discussing the finer points of family connections,

alongside advice provided in the native Aberdonian tongue. This scenario is also familiar in the many fine archives, registration offices and museums of the region. While 'ancestral tourism' is by no means a new phenomenon, it is only relatively recently that its latent economic potential has become the focus of attention by the tourism sector. Family

history societies, archives, libraries and local heritage centres are also realising that they have an important role to play in unlocking the benefits by providing a high-quality and integrated service for the ancestral tourist.

According to official figures from VisitScotland, there are approximately 50 million people worldwide who can lay claim to Scottish ancestry. By extension, the North East of Scotland, with around 9 per cent of the Scottish population, might therefore expect almost 5 million of these to have family roots in the area. It is further estimated that ancestral tourism is worth around £75 million per year to the Scottish economy and research has also shown that ancestral tourists tend to stay longer and spend more than the average visitor.

The first Year of Scottish Homecoming in 2009 demonstrated the worldwide interest in Scottish roots. With a

NICK BARRATT is giving a talk about Family History and Ancestral Tourism at Who Do You Think You Are? Live in Olympia on Saturday 25 February at 12pm in SoG Studio One. To find out more about the show, turn to page 65.



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second Year of Homecoming scheduled for 2014, preparations are already beginning to take shape. As part of this process, a free facilitated workshop will take place at the Kintore Arms Hotel, Inverurie, Aberdeenshire, on 15 March 2012, with Dr Nick Barratt as guest speaker. Along with other speakers from VisitScotland and local organisations, the aim of the day is to increase awareness of the potential of ancestral tourism among hoteliers, bed and breakfast proprietors, tour guide operators and the like, as well as to establish partnerships for future joint working.

The event, made possible with money from the European Regional Development Fund, is the brainchild of the Aberdeen and North East Scotland Ancestral Tourism Partnership, a consortium of regional archives, museums and family history organisations. The partnership's members range in size from large institutions such as Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire Archives and the University of Aberdeen's Special Collections through to much smaller voluntary organisations like the Portsoy Salmon Bothy, the Family History Society of Buchan and the Museum of Scottish Lighthouses.

CONTACT

Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire Archives

Town House
Broad Street
Aberdeen
AB10 1AQ
Tel: 01224 522513

Old Aberdeen House

Dunbar Street
Aberdeen
AB24 3UJ
Tel: 01224 481775
E-mail:
archives@aberdeencity.gov.uk
www.aberdeencity.gov.uk/archives

Aberdeen and North East Scotland Family History Society

164 King Street
Aberdeen
Scotland
AB24 5BD
Tel: 01224 646323
www.anesfhs.org.uk

A single port of call

As any family historian worth his or her salt will know, research can take you down all sorts of weird and wonderful avenues. While it is all too easy to be dazzled by the information that it is available on the internet, the real fun to be derived from tracing your family tree is from getting your hands dirty with original documents, held by regional archives and local studies



centres, and the chance to 'walk in the footsteps' of your forebears and to connect with the ancestral homeland.

It is also fair to say that more than half the battle is knowing where to find the records that are relevant to your research. This is where a single first port of call for the ancestral tourist can be so important. The website of the Aberdeen and North East Scotland Ancestral Tourism Partnership, www.northeastscotlandroots.com, is just such a resource. The website, which has an accompanying booklet entitled Routes to Your North East Roots, was used by Bev Clarke, a librarian from Tasmania.

In 1989, Bev had traced her ancestors back to her 3x great grandfather Alexander Coutts, but had hit the proverbial brick wall familiar to so many ancestor hunters and thought she would never be able to find anything more about his family history. The only information she could find at that point was that he had been a compositor, had died in Hobart in 1859 at the age of 47 and had been 'born in Scotland'.

However, more than 20 years later, an internet search gave Bev a starting point to research much more, which eventually led back to the birth of her 6x great grandfather in 1699. At that point, May 2010, she was busy planning a holiday in Europe. What she discovered resulted in a change of holiday plans to include a visit to a part of Scotland she had never been

The Charter Room in Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire Archives' Town House is a purpose-built archive constructed in Victorian times for the council's records.

The whole area gave her such a sense of her past that she found it almost impossible to leave

to before – Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire.

Bev had discovered that her ancestor Alexander Coutts was the third generation in a lineage of men with the same name. His grandfather, also Alexander Coutts, was the son-in-law of Alexander Ross, poet and schoolmaster in Lochlee, Scotland – Bev was indeed related to a man who was both famous in his own lifetime and also influenced Scotland's National Bard, Robert Burns.

The poem for which Ross is best remembered is *Helenore* or, *The Fortunate Shepherdess*, first published in Aberdeen in 1768.

Once on the spot in Scotland, Bev utilised her considerable research skills firstly in Edinburgh, at both the ScotlandsPeople Centre and the National Library of Scotland. Her research then took her to the North East of Scotland, where she became a regular at Aberdeen City Library's Local Studies section. She also made



© Aberdeen City Archives

good use of original records at the Gordon Highlanders Museum, Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire Archives and the excellent resources available at the Aberdeen and North East Scotland Family History Society.

As an important part of her visit, Bev wanted to visit Lochlee, to see the old kirkyard where her famous ancestor and his wife are buried, and perhaps to see the ruins of the old schoolhouse, which online searches suggested might still be possible. Bev enlisted the services of professional Blue Badge Tourist Guide Elma McMenemy and at first booked her for a day visit to Lochlee and perhaps other relevant locations and places of general interest. Elma herself became fascinated by the story, and before Bev had returned to Tasmania, they had spent a total of seven days touring locations across the North East of Scotland relevant to Bev's family history as well as visiting some of the area's other historical attractions, including the castles of Drum and Craigievar, now owned by the National Trust for Scotland.

As with many ancestral tourists who visit the places that

loom large in their family trees, Bev was taken aback by the overwhelming emotion she felt during many of the visits. Indeed, the whole area gave her such a sense of her past that she found it almost impossible to leave, so much so that she altered her plans, and instead of visiting Oxford to explore another branch of her family, she extended her stay in the North East of Scotland. Now back in Tasmania, Bev is researching further and has already booked flights to Aberdeen for a visit in September and October 2012.

Bev's story is a tangible demonstration of how a person's quest for his or her family history can translate into an ancestral tourism experience: she had a requirement for a tour guide, accommodation and sustenance, all of which means income for local businesses.

It is also a great example of how a family historian, equipped with the right information, can make use of a number of different archives, local studies centres or museums to compile the information they are looking for. To enable this to happen requires two preconditions:

firstly, those organisations holding information of relevance to family historians need to work cooperatively. Secondly, accommodation providers, tour guide operators and others in the tourism sector need to be provided with the information and knowledge so that they can confidently point ancestral tourists in the right direction. The Aberdeen and North East Scotland Ancestral Tourism Partnership is leading the way in making life easier for people who really want to 'put flesh on the bones' of their tree.

Rural gems

Setting out on a journey of discovery into your roots will take you not only to the cities where the main archives, libraries and family history societies tend to be located, but also to the towns, villages and rural communities where your ancestors came from. Smaller organisations, where the genealogist can often glean really detailed, juicy information, have an important role to play in this respect. One such example is the Portsoy Salmon Bothy, located on a beautiful stretch of the Moray Firth coastline.

The Salmon House was purpose built in 1834 by the Seafield Estate, which then owned the salmon fishing rights along the coast. The three-storey building provided an office, a bothy, an ice house, a fish preparation area, workshop and storage accommodation. The salmon fishing began in earnest at a station near to the mouth of the Burn of the Boyne as early as 1828. Abundant supplies of ice were obtained originally from Loch Soy and the millpond and brought in by horse and cart. The Salmon House continued in use until 1990, when salmon netting was stopped at the Portsoy station.

Today the Salmon Bothy is owned and run by the Scottish Traditional Boat Festival, an annual event that attracts thousands of visitors to Portsoy each summer. It comprises a museum housed in what were the ice chambers that display artefacts and information about Portsoy's harbours, the industry and trade and the salmon fishing operations.

The 'Bothy' or sleeping quarters remains as it was, complete with bunk beds, with the addition of two computers that are used for family history research. There is also a growing resource bank with books and other resources available to browse or borrow on request.

Just along the coast in Fraserburgh, another aspect of maritime life is to be found in the records at the Museum of Scottish Lighthouses, where holdings reflect the work of the Northern Lighthouse Board in Scotland and the Isle of Man. Resources available for family history are light keeper service records, visitor books, returns books and letter books from various lighthouses, personal memoirs and oral histories from keepers and their families, and a photographic archive, which includes all lighthouses in Scotland and the Isle of Man.

Such smaller and what you might call more specialised organisations can yield immense treasures for the family historian through the local knowledge of the staff or by way of unique access to specific records. By recognising the requirements of ancestral tourists and by organisations both big and small joining forces to cater for them, family historians will have an enriched experience whilst supporting the local communities where their ancestors once thrived.

The facilitated workshop at the Kintore Arms Hotel, Inverurie, on 15 March has been made possible by European Regional Development Funding. To find out more visit www.northeastscotlandroots.com.

SEARCH AROUND
192,000 burial records dating back to the 18th century for some Aberdeen cemeteries, including St Nicholas Kirkyard, Nigg, St Peter's (including the Spital) and Trinity at www.deceasedonline.com.

Bev Clarke at Drum Castle.



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