



THE LOVE SCOTLAND GUIDE N. 002

Burns Night

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On 25 January 1759, in a clay cottage in Alloway that his father built by hand, Scotland's national poet was born into a storm so fierce that part of the gable wall collapsed days later. Just over two centuries on, that birthday is marked in homes, halls and embassies from Ayrshire to Auckland with recited poetry, piped-in haggis and a good deal of whisky. This is Guide 002 in The Love Scotland Guide series.

Who Robert Burns Actually Was

Robert Burns (1759-1796) was a working tenant farmer from Ayrshire who wrote in both Scots and English, and who became famous in his own lifetime with the 1786 publication of *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect*, known as the Kilmarnock edition. His output ranged from the narrative comedy of *Tam o' Shanter* to the tenderness of *A Red, Red Rose* and the radical egalitarianism of *A Man's a Man for A' That*. He died at just 37, most likely from a heart condition worsened by years of hard physical labour.

Beyond his own verse, Burns spent his later years collecting and reworking hundreds of traditional Scottish songs for anthologies such as The Scots Musical Museum, rescuing melodies and lyrics that might otherwise have been lost. Auld Lang Syne, now sung worldwide at the stroke of midnight on Hogmanay, comes from this work - Burns took an older folk fragment and shaped it into the version we know.

Why 25 January

Burns Night falls on the poet's birthday, 25 January. The tradition began not on that date, however, but in the summer of 1801, when nine of his friends gathered at Burns Cottage in Alloway to mark the fifth anniversary of his death with a meal, speeches and his poetry. The evening was such a success that they resolved to repeat it annually, and soon settled on his January birthday as the fitting occasion. The format they improvised more than two hundred years ago is still recognisable in the Burns suppers held today.

How a Burns Supper Runs

A formal Burns supper follows a running order that has changed remarkably little. Guests are piped in, the host gives a welcome, and the Selkirk Grace - a short blessing associated with Burns - is said before the meal. Soup is served first, then comes the centrepiece: the haggis is carried in to the sound of bagpipes while a speaker performs Burns's Address to a Haggis, plunging a knife into the dish at the line that calls for it. A toast is drunk to the haggis, usually in whisky, before everyone eats.

After dinner the tone shifts to oratory. The main speech, the Immortal Memory, reflects on Burns's life and work. Then comes the Toast to the Lassies, originally a thank-you to the women who prepared the meal and now a light, teasing speech, answered by a Reply to the Toast given on the women's behalf. More poems and songs follow, and the night traditionally closes with everyone joining hands for Auld Lang Syne.

The Food: Haggis, Neeps and Tatties

Haggis is a savoury pudding made from sheep's pluck - the heart, liver and lungs - minced with onion, oatmeal, suet, stock and spices, then traditionally encased in the animal's stomach lining and simmered. The result is warm, peppery and closer in texture to a coarse, moist stuffing than most first-timers expect. It is served with "neeps and tatties": mashed swede (called turnip in Scotland) and mashed potatoes, frequently with a whisky sauce alongside.

Vegetarian and vegan haggis, built from pulses, oats, seeds and vegetables, is now widely sold and served at many suppers, so the tradition is easy to keep whatever your diet. If you want to buy the real thing to take home, note that traditional sheep's-lung haggis cannot legally be imported into the United States, which is why versions sold there are made to a different recipe.

Doing It Yourself

You do not need a piper, a kilt or a grand hall to hold a Burns supper - plenty are informal dinners among friends. The essentials are a haggis with neeps and tatties, at least one reading of the Address to a Haggis, and a dram of Scotch to toast with. Printed copies of the key poems make it easy for guests to join in, and Auld Lang Syne to finish needs no rehearsal. If you are in Scotland on the night, restaurants, hotels and community halls across the country run ticketed suppers, and Burns Cottage and the Robert Burns Birthplace Museum in Alloway are worth visiting year-round for the wider story.

Myths Worth Retiring

Myth: Burns Night is a public holiday in Scotland. It is not. However enthusiastically it is celebrated, 25 January is an ordinary working day; Scotland's official national day is St Andrew's Day on 30 November.

Myth: the haggis is a wild Scottish animal. This long-running joke - complete with tales of a creature whose legs are longer on one side for running around hills - is pure fun, sometimes aimed at visitors. Haggis is a prepared dish, not a beast.

Myth: Burns wrote Auld Lang Syne from scratch. He adapted and expanded an older folk song rather than inventing it, noting himself that he had taken it down from tradition. What he added turned a fragment into the enduring song sung today.

Frequently Asked Questions

Do I have to eat haggis to celebrate Burns Night?

No. Haggis is the traditional centrepiece and part of the ritual around the Address to a Haggis, but vegetarian and vegan haggis are widely available, and the poetry, songs and toasts matter just as much as the menu.

What should I wear to a Burns supper?

It depends entirely on the event. Formal suppers may invite Highland dress or black tie, while a supper among friends can be as casual as any dinner. If you have a ticket, the invitation will usually say; when in doubt, ask the host.

Is Burns Night celebrated outside Scotland?

Very much so. Scottish diaspora communities and Burns clubs hold suppers across the world, from North America and Australia to Russia, where Burns has long been popular in translation. Wherever there is a Scottish connection, you are likely to find a Burns supper on or near 25 January.