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THE LOVE SCOTLAND GUIDE N. 005

Scots & Scottish Slang

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In the 2011 census, around 1.5 million people in Scotland reported being able to speak Scots - the first time the question had ever been asked on a UK census form. That single number settled a long argument at a stroke: Scots is not sloppy English or a thick accent, but a distinct language with its own vocabulary, grammar and centuries of written literature behind it. This is Guide 005 in The Love Scotland Guide series.

A Language, Not Just an Accent

Scots and English are close cousins. Both descend from the Anglic (Germanic) branch that arrived in Britain with Old English, which is why so many Scots words look like English words wearing different clothes - hoose for house, oot for out, ken for know. Over the centuries Scots developed separately, absorbing words from Old Norse, Dutch, French and Latin through trade and the old alliance with France, and by the 1400s it was the language of the royal court and of state records. The [Scots Language Centre](#) traces this history in

detail, and the [Scottish Government](#) now recognises Scots as one of the country's indigenous languages alongside English and Gaelic.

A crucial point that trips up visitors: Scots is not the same thing as Scottish Gaelic. Gaelic is a Celtic language, unrelated in structure and vocabulary, spoken chiefly in the Highlands and Islands and supported by Bòrd na Gàidhlig. Scots grew from the Lowlands and the Northern Isles. Confusing the two is a bit like confusing Welsh with English because both are spoken in Wales.

How the Words Are Recorded

Scots has been written down and catalogued far more rigorously than most people assume. The [Dictionaries of the Scots Language](#) bring together two monumental works - the Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue and the Scottish National Dictionary - into a single free online resource covering the language from the 1100s to the present day. For literature, the [Scottish Poetry Library](#) holds centuries of verse written in Scots, and the [National Library of Scotland](#) preserves manuscripts, printed books and recordings that document how the language has changed. Schools increasingly teach it too: [Education Scotland](#) produces classroom materials so that pupils learn Scots as a subject rather than being told to "speak properly."

Doric and Regional Variety

There is no single "Scots" any more than there is a single English. The best-known regional form is Doric, the Scots of the North East around Aberdeenshire, famous for turning "what" into fit and "where" into far - a local greeting is "Fit like?" (how are you?). Other varieties include Insular Scots in Orkney and Shetland, which carries heavy Norse influence, plus distinct Central, Southern and Ulster forms. A word can shift meaning across the country: a child is a bairn in the east and much of the north, but a wean in the west around Glasgow.

Everyday Words Worth Knowing

A handful of words will carry you a long way in conversation. Dreich describes the grey, damp, dismal weather Scotland does so well - it was voted the country's favourite Scots word in a 2019 poll run by the [Scottish Book Trust](#) during Book Week Scotland. Braw means fine or good; blether is a long friendly chat; scunnered means thoroughly fed up; and glaikit describes someone looking vacant or foolish.

Some words are quietly practical traps for the unwary. If a shopkeeper mentions your messages, they mean your shopping, not your texts. Peely-wally means pale or off-colour. Coorie means to snuggle in or nestle down for warmth, and couthy describes something cosy and homely. And the small word wee is everywhere - it rarely means literally tiny, and often just softens a sentence, as in "a wee minute" or "a wee dram."

Scots in Print and Popular Culture

Scots has a living literary tradition rather than a museum-piece one. Robert Burns wrote much of his best-loved work in Scots, and his song "Auld Lang Syne" is sung around the world every New Year, usually by people who have no idea they are singing in the language - his life and manuscripts are cared for at the Robert Burns Birthplace Museum run by the National Trust for Scotland. In the twentieth century the poet Hugh MacDiarmid led a deliberate revival, and Irvine Welsh's novel *Trainspotting* put raw contemporary Edinburgh Scots on bestseller lists. For gentler fare, the comic strips *The Broons* and *Oor Wullie* have run in *The Sunday Post* since 1936, published by [DC Thomson](#), keeping everyday Scots on breakfast tables for generations. Scots even has a formal foothold in public life: the [Scottish Parliament](#) accepts contributions and correspondence in the language.

Myths Worth Retiring

Myth: Scots is just English spoken with a strong accent. It has its own vocabulary, spelling conventions and grammar, and a written record stretching back centuries - accent is only the surface. Linguists treat it as a language on the Anglic spectrum, distinct from Standard English.

Myth: Scots and Gaelic are the same thing. They are unrelated in origin. Gaelic is Celtic; Scots is Germanic. They come from different language families entirely and grew up in different parts of the country.

Myth: Scots is dying out. Around 1.5 million people reported speaking it in the 2011 census, it is taught in schools, and it appears daily in newspapers, poetry and broadcasting. It is very much a living, everyday language, even if its status has waxed and waned.

Frequently Asked Questions

Is Scots the same as Gaelic?

No. Scottish Gaelic is a Celtic language spoken mainly in the Highlands and Islands, while Scots is a Germanic language descended from the same roots as English and spoken chiefly in the Lowlands and Northern Isles. They are separate languages with separate histories.

Will locals understand me if I only speak English?

Yes - virtually everyone in Scotland speaks English fluently, and you will be understood everywhere. Scots words and phrases pepper everyday speech, so picking up a few - aye for yes, wee for small, ken for know - simply makes conversations warmer and more fun.

What does "dreich" actually mean?

It describes weather that is dull, grey, cold and wet all at once - the kind of overcast, drizzly day that settles in and lingers. It was voted Scotland's favourite word in a 2019 public poll, and once you have experienced a genuinely dreich afternoon, you will understand why the Scots needed a single word for it.

Official websites mentioned

Scots Language Centre: scotslanguage.com

Scottish Government: gov.scot

Dictionaries of the Scots Language: dsl.ac.uk

Scottish Poetry Library: scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk

National Library of Scotland: nls.uk

Education Scotland: education.gov.scot

Scottish Book Trust: scottishbooktrust.com

DC Thomson: dcthomson.co.uk

Scottish Parliament: parliament.scot