



THE LOVE SCOTLAND GUIDE N. 006

Scottish Superstitions

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On the esplanade at [Edinburgh Castle](#) there is a small cast-iron drinking fountain called the Witches' Well, marking the spot where more people were burned as witches than almost anywhere else in Britain. This is Guide 006 in The Love Scotland Guide series.

Where Scottish Superstition Comes From

Many Scottish superstitions sit on a foundation older than Christianity, drawn from Gaelic and Norse belief and the seasonal festivals of Samhain (the root of modern Halloween) and Beltane. When the Church arrived it rarely erased these customs so much as absorbed them, which is why a saint's day and a pagan fire ritual can share the same date. The result is a layered folk tradition where practical fear - of failed harvests, sickness and death at sea - was managed through ritual.

You can trace this history through real collections rather than hearsay. The [National Library of Scotland](#) holds

chapbooks and ballad sheets that spread these beliefs cheaply for centuries, and the [National Museum of Scotland](#) in Edinburgh displays charm-stones and protective objects that ordinary households once relied on.

First-Footing and Hogmanay

Scotland's most enduring superstition is first-footing: the belief that the first person to cross your threshold after midnight on Hogmanay sets the household's luck for the year. Tradition holds that the ideal first-foot is a tall, dark-haired man - a preference often linked, though not proven, to fair-haired Norse raiders being an unwelcome sight at the door. He should arrive bearing gifts: coal for warmth, shortbread or black bun for food, and whisky for good cheer.

An older companion custom is saining, in which a house was blessed at New Year with water from a ford and the smoke of smouldering juniper to purify it. You can see first-footing's living descendant at the torchlit processions and street party of [Edinburgh's Hogmanay](#), and the fire-festival strand of the tradition survives most vividly at Shetland's [Up Helly Aa](#).

Witchcraft and the Weight of the Law

Scottish superstition has a dark historical core. Under the Witchcraft Act of 1563, an estimated several thousand people - the large majority of them women - were accused, and roughly two thousand are thought to have been executed before the Act was repealed in 1736. The North Berwick witch trials of 1590-91 drew in King James VI himself, who believed storms had been raised to sink his ship, and who later wrote the treatise *Daemonologie*.

The documentary record is remarkably full. The [National Records of Scotland](#) preserves trial papers, and the University of Edinburgh's [Survey of Scottish Witchcraft](#) has mapped the accused across the country. In 2022 the First Minister issued a formal apology to those convicted, a reminder that these beliefs had lethal consequences rather than merely spooky ones.

Rowans, Salt and Everyday Charms

Much of Scottish superstition was small, domestic and protective. A rowan tree planted beside the door was believed to keep witches and ill fortune away, and its red berries and cross-marked stalks were thought especially potent. Salt spilled was bad luck unless a pinch was thrown over the left shoulder; a knife given as a gift was said to "cut" a friendship unless a coin was passed back in return.

The Highlands also held a distinct belief in an *dà shealladh*, the "two sights" or second sight - the reputed ability to foresee events, most famously attributed to the Brahan Seer. Many of these customs are explained for visitors through [VisitScotland](#) and brought to life in live performance at the [Scottish Storytelling Centre](#) on Edinburgh's Royal Mile.

Superstition at Weddings and Milestones

Scottish life events carried their own rules. In some regions a bride or groom underwent the blackening, being covered in soot, treacle and feathers by friends before the wedding - a rowdy ordeal meant to ward off evil spirits and prove the couple could withstand hardship together. White heather was carried for luck, and a silver coin tucked in the shoe was thought to bring prosperity.

These customs still surface at weddings and heritage events across the country, and the wider folk calendar is documented at heritage sites cared for by the National Trust for Scotland, including the Robert Burns Birthplace Museum in Alloway, whose poem Halloween is one of the richest records of old Scottish divination games.

Myths Worth Retiring

Myth: Witches in Scotland were hanged, like the accused at Salem. In fact, convicted witches in Scotland were typically strangled at the stake and then burned, a different practice from the hangings used in the American colonies and much of England.

Myth: First-footing has always required a dark-haired man. The core belief is simply that the first visitor sets the year's luck; the "tall and dark" preference is a regional refinement, and in some areas a fair-haired or female first-foot was considered unlucky only locally, not nationwide.

Myth: Halloween is an American import to Scotland. The opposite is closer to true - the festival descends from Gaelic Samhain, and Scottish and Irish emigrants carried customs such as guising and turnip lanterns across the Atlantic, where they evolved into the modern holiday.

Frequently Asked Questions

Do Scottish people still believe in these superstitions?

Most are now practised as tradition and good fun rather than genuine fear. First-footing, carrying white heather and touching wood remain common, and many households still keep to small rituals at Hogmanay without treating them as literal magic.

Where can I learn about the witch trials in person?

Edinburgh Castle's esplanade holds the Witches' Well memorial, the National Museum of Scotland displays related objects, and the National Records of Scotland and the University of Edinburgh's online survey let you search original trial documents by name and place.

What should I bring if I'm invited to first-foot someone?

The traditional gifts are a lump of coal, something to eat such as shortbread or black bun, and a dram of whisky. Arriving empty-handed is considered unlucky, so bring at least a token, and step in only after the clock has struck midnight.

Official websites mentioned

Edinburgh Castle: historicenvironment.scot

National Library of Scotland: nls.uk

National Museum of Scotland: nms.ac.uk

Edinburgh's Hogmanay: edinburghshogmanay.com

Up Helly Aa: uphellyaa.org

National Records of Scotland: nrscotland.gov.uk

Survey of Scottish Witchcraft: witches.hca.ed.ac.uk

VisitScotland: visitscotland.com

Scottish Storytelling Centre: scottishstorytellingcentre.com