

Tale from the Garden!

January is a month that often captures the heart of winter. In Scotland and across many places of the world, weather dominates the local news. Snow, sleet, and rain may leave you longing for the warmth of the indoors. Yet, January also offers a holiday that is guaranteed to elevate everyone's spirits during these chilly nights. January 25th is the annual celebration of the life and poetry of Robert Burns. It is on this day that formal Burns Night Suppers are prepared alongside traditional music, fare, and drink. Amongst the promise of excitement during these festivities while lifting a dram, we must take a moment to reflect on the origins of this special day. Robert Burns was born on January 25th, 1759, at Alloway in Ayrshire. He was a man from humble beginnings, as his father was a working gardener. However, it was his father's influence that taught him about the ideals of human worth and conduct. His example set the path for his upbringing, education, and perspective on life. He did not receive a formal education, but this by no means confounded his future. His father taught him reading, writing, arithmetic, geography, and history & this foundation soon allowed him to express himself through poetry.

Robert Burns' words could not be suppressed. He had a gift to use poetry as a medium to express emotion, societal awareness, and the adversities faced by men and women who held onto the bare elements of existence. Often these themes are universally found across cultures, making his poems timeless attributes to the foundations of human nature and humanity itself. Therefore, it is not surprising to see his work translated into countless languages across the world. His literary work is immortalized in both paper and song, achieving him the title of Scotland's national bard.

The first Burns Supper was hosted over 200 years ago. Burns Night is valued differently to each who celebrate. The centre of any Burns Night Supper is the food. Haggis is often held in high reverence during the night's celebrations. This traditional food may forever be linked to Scotland. However, some historians believe it to be an example of the practice of hunters worldwide by using up every part of an animal. Robert Burns poem, 'Address to a Haggis', immortalized this dish into the traditional menu. Haggis is a savoury dish made from minced sheep's heart, liver, and lungs mixed with onion, suet, spices and oatmeal. When served with neeps and tatties, it is a satisfying meal to many.

No Burns Night Supper is complete without whisky. A wee dram is an integral part of the night. From a celebratory toast after the Address to the Haggis to the last closing song of Auld Lang Syne, this drink will be sure to warm the heart and soul of every guest in attendance.

The evening is not complete without poetry citations of Robert Burns. His poems touch all aspects of humanity, reflecting not only on triumphs but hardships. He articulates mankind's nature to weep and mourn, sing and rejoice, and redeem the joys of life. For these reasons, Robert Burns will always be classified as one of Scotland's literary greats that still hold meaning in modern society.

And so ... the words of Auld Lang Syne ... Times Long Past
"Should auld acquaintance be forgot, And never brought to mind?
Should auld acquaintance be forgot, And auld lang syne!
For auld lang syne, my jo, For auld lang syne,
We'll tak a cup o' kindness yet, For auld lang syne.
And surely ye'll be your pint stowp! And surely I'll be mine!
And we'll take a cup o' kindness yet, For auld lang syne.

We twa hae run about the braes, And pou'd the gowan fine;
But we've wander'd mony a weary fitt, Sin' auld lang syne.
We twa hae paidl'd in the burn, Frae morning sun till dine;
But seas between us braid hae roar'd, Sin' auld lang syne.
And there's a hand, my trusty fiere! And gie's a hand o' thine!
And we'll tak a right gude-willie-waught, For auld lang syne.
For auld lang syne, my jo, For auld lang syne,
We'll tak a cup o' kindness yet, For auld lang syne.



What makes "Auld Lang Syne" so powerful? It has nothing to do with a New Year and everything to do with an old friend. It is a tribute toast to treasured time spent roaming rolling Scottish hills and swimming stony Scottish streams with a cherished childhood companion.

The Treasure of Old Friendship

A new year may be a good time for new resolutions, but the ending of an old year is a good time for reflection on what has past & that means not merely lesson-learning reflection for future improvement. Some reflection is meant simply to treasure with gratitude what we were once given and will never have in the same way again. Old friendship is that sort of treasure. Few gifts in life are as precious as companions with whom we once spent long summer days and talked long into the night; with whom we shared thrilling adventures and disastrous mishaps; with whom we bent over in convulsive laughter and sat silently in tearful loss; in whom we confided the hopes and fears of our youthful years.

Most often we didn't choose our best friends as much as we were thrown together with them in "accidents" of providence. Frequently, they happened to move in next door or up the street or in our tenement or began attending our church or had the locker or workstation next to us.

We became friends out of forced proximity, the joy of shared interests, and the deep, unspoken knowledge that it never has been good for man to be alone, which we learned meant far more than romantic love: (2 Samuel 1 v26) "I grieve for you, Jonathan my brother; you were very dear to me. Your love for me was wonderful, more wonderful than that of women."; (John 15 v14-15) "You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I have learned from my Father I have made known to you."

Let Auld Acquaintance Not Be Forgot

Our old acquaintances, particularly those who helped us see and love what is true and pure and beautiful and excellent (Philippians 4 v8 "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure. Whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things."), should not be forgotten. They should be recalled and revered. They left an indelible imprint on our souls and they still shape who we are. They were good, gracious gifts from God himself (James 1 v17 "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows."), to whom it is fitting to give heartfelt, profound thanks. The beginning of a new year & new life chapter is a good time to remember precious characters of chapters past.

And perhaps it is time, before it's too late, to schedule that lunch with or make that phone call or write that email or old-fashioned handwritten letter to a cherished friend simply to express again or at last what they have meant to you — still mean to you. Or if they are beyond contact now, it would be fitting to honour their significance to someone who can share with you the sweet memory of invaluable moments that you once knew.

A pioneer of the Romantic movement, Burns was inspired by the beauty of the Scottish countryside with flowers not only being a recurring theme but the stars of some of his most acclaimed works:

- ❖ "The small birds rejoice in the green leaves returning,
The murmuring streamlet winds clear thro' the vale;
The primroses blow in the dews of the morning,
And wild-scattered cowslips bedeck the green dale"
(‘The Small Birds Rejoice’ written by Robert Burns in 1788)
- ❖ ‘To A Mountain Daisy’ laments the fragile beauty of the ‘wee, modest, crimson-tipped flow’r’ after it has been turned over by the plough (For I maun crush among the stoure / Thy slender stem: / To spare thee now is past my pow’r, / Thou bonnie gem).
- ❖ In ‘A Red, Red Rose’, the poet compares his love to the vibrant summer-bloomer: ‘O my Luve’s like a red, red rose / That’s newly sprung in June’.
- ❖ Flowers also provide the backdrop to the story of Willie and Nelly in ‘On A Bank of Flowers’, where Willie finds the beautiful Nelly lying peacefully with her eyes closed, on a bank of flowers – and dares to steal a kiss.

Wild flowers, plants and fungi are the life support for all Scotland's wildlife and their colour and character brighten mountains and glens, lochs and islands.

And so, to my plant of the week - the iconic Scottish heather. As the people of Scotland celebrate Burn's Night you might see many of them put a sprig of heather in their lapel!

The name 'heather' is believed to come from the Scottish word 'haeddre', which was used to describe a heathland, or a shrubland habitat. There are two main types of heather – Calluna or common heather and Erica, which is sometimes called 'bell heather'. Common heather, also called 'ling', is widespread across all landscapes in Scotland and is hardy enough to cope with the poor acid Highland soils.

The heather flower's meaning comes from its genus name, *Calluna*, which stems from the Greek word 'kalluno', and means to cleanse or adorn. This is appropriate, as heather plants were once used for making brooms. Heather was also hardy enough for Highlanders of old to make a variety of other items from the tough stems – from bedding to insulation, a dye for clothing, to make rope and to make ale, though the recipe for the original ale is not known.

Robert Louis Stevenson, a Scottish writer and poet, wrote a poem entitled 'Heather Ale'. This poem tells the tale of Vikings and the Pictish King. According to the poem, the Vikings defeated the Picts army and cornered the king and his son on a cliff in an attempt to gain the recipe for Heather Ale. However, the king would rather be thrown off the cliff than give up the recipe. He loses the battle but takes the secret recipe to his grave.

This poem depicts not only the importance of heather to Scotland, but how it grew beautifully and bountifully in many areas:

"From the bonny bells of heather
They brewed a drink long-syne,
Was sweeter far then honey,
Was stronger far than wine.
They brewed it and they drank it,
And lay in a blessed swound
For days and days together
In their dwellings underground."



There are records dating back to the seventh century of heather's healing properties. In the sixteenth century, German doctor Paulus Aegineta noted that the flowers, leaves, and stems healed various types of sores, both internal and external. Nicolas Alexandre, a Benedictine monk, also noted that heather tea could dissolve kidney stones. It is said to have restorative powers and it is still prescribed for the treatment of rheumatism and for urinary infections.

According to a Scottish legend, Malvina, daughter of a Celtic bard, was engaged to a warrior named Oscar. Oscar was killed in battle, and the messenger that delivered the news gave her heather as a token of Oscar's love. As her tears fell on the heather, it turned white. Though she was sad, she wished happiness on others and hoped that anyone who found white heather would have good luck.

Queen Victoria popularized the meaning of heather as good luck in England because of her appreciation for Scottish lore and traditions. Victorians may also have associated heather with good luck because of its scarcity at the time, much like we consider four-leaf clovers good luck.

In the sixteenth century, Clan Ranald, a Scottish clan, believed that they won a battle because they wore white heather in their bonnets, which gave them both luck and protection.

In Scotland, it is common to include a sprig of white heather in a bride's bouquet for good luck.

Heather flowers typically grow in shades of white, purple, and pink.

White heather symbolizes protection, good luck, or wishes coming true.

Purple heather symbolizes admiration and solitude.

And last, but not least, heather is used to create the most deliciously scented soaps, candles, perfumes and more.... each can whisk you away to a land of clean air, sparkling water and scudding clouds, where the sharp scent of pine mixes with the gentle scent of highland heather. Heather honey is made in hives left on the moors in summer. Rich and flavoursome, every mouthful of heather honey evokes a sense of Scotland's unspoiled wilderness. Perfect stirred into porridge, added to a smoothie, spooned over yogurt or simply spread onto a toast to add a little luxury to your breakfast, this 'champagne' of all honeys makes a lovely gift for those we love. Mmmmmm! Lovely!

As we toast the arrival of 2022, let's take a prayerful cup of thankfulness for the kindness God has shown to us in days long since gone & in thankfulness for the loving kindness he will continue to show in days to come.

2 Corinthians 4 v6-7 "For God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. But we this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us."

Good works, within the heart, within the journey.

Deep within our soul there is a treasure, God's glory.

Within the Potter's hands our hearts are being prepared, being moulded, to forever show ...

God's great harvest, His good works!