

The Castles and Estates of Scotland – a Small Sample

By Graceann Macleod



When I first fell in love with my British husband, I had almost entirely convinced myself that every citizen of the United Kingdom lived in a castle. While of course this isn't true, there are so many enormous castles and sprawling estates dotting the Scottish countryside that it could **almost** be possible. Every time we visit Scotland, we check out another stately home, but I think we will need to take our vitamins and stay very healthy if we want to live long enough to see them all.

Many visitors to the United Kingdom write about their sojourns to Buckingham Palace, Windsor, Balmoral and other such sites. While these are beautiful places and are justly beloved, I'd like to concentrate on three in Scotland that don't get as much attention, and thus may be as new to you as they were to me.

Dunnottar Castle – An Arduous Walk Richly Rewarded

Visiting Dunnottar is an astounding lesson in the differences between American and Scottish tourism. There are parts of the

historic site that are downright dangerous to navigate. Slippery, steep paths, sharp drops onto a



rocky shoreline and a noticeable absence of guardrails are part of the charm. Instead of making the site hideous by blocking it off or putting up pedestrian-friendly walkways, the officials at Dunnottar expect, refreshingly, that guests know their own limitations. There were some segments of the site that I was not able to navigate, and that was okay. The result is an unspoiled view of an historic vista dating back hundreds of years.

William
Wallace,

Mary Queen of Scots, the future King Charles II – all these luminaries were present at the Castle at one time or another. Dunnottar's main claim to fame, however, lies with the small garrison that held out against Cromwell's army for eight months, saving the Scottish Crown Jewels. These priceless pieces are now resident in Edinburgh Castle.



Our visit began with a hike from the car park out to the castle itself. It was a warm, sunny day and the walk was so lovely. That journey was just the beginning, however. There are numerous steps between the land and the outcropping on which the Castle sits, and it is a precipitous jaunt indeed. I lost count at about 180 steps. A photo was taken of me making my way into Dunnottar, and I am only a little purple dot at a very great distance.



Once inside the outer defenses, you are presented with the option of going up into the Keep or visiting the main area, the bowling green. I eventually wandered over all the grounds, including the chapel and museum areas, before asking another visitor to take a picture of me to prove that I'd actually accomplished the climb. The view from within the castle grounds was so exquisite that I immediately forgot my sore legs, and simply stood back, staring in wonder.

As I was touring the grounds, I encountered a bridal party setting up for their wedding on the grounds. I was astounded. It was a full, formal wedding with all the requisite guests. I could only hope that this bride's grandma brought her track shoes.

Some tips: It might be wise to carry a flashlight, as some areas of the Castle are dark. Comfortable, sturdy walking shoes are **imperative**. This is not the place to show off your kicky little sandals. Finally, carry a bottle of water with you on warm days. By the time we finished our tour and returned to the car, I was dehydrated due to the exertion and was feeling quite unwell.

Glamis – Childhood Home of a Queen; Still Home to a Family

One thing I discovered in visiting the castles and estates around Scotland is that many of them are still being used as family homes for descendants of the original residents. In the case of Glamis, which was the childhood home of Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother, the Lord and Lady Strathmore and their small son call this beautiful place, which has been on the site in some shape or form since 1372, home.

Our first introduction to Glamis was a mile-long drive up the avenue to the house, and the thought that it wasn't a home, but an enormous complex. After checking in at the gate and parking in the ample and convenient car park, we signed up for our tour and rested until it was time to begin our trip back in time.

Our guide as an avuncular, booming-voiced gent who had all sorts of great stories about the past of the Castle, most of which featured ghosts, retribution and royal visits. The Queen Mother spent much of her childhood here, and her presence is felt in most areas of the home. Her second daughter, Margaret Rose, was born at Glamis in 1930 and this fact is shared with great pride. She was the first royal in direct line to the Throne to be born in Scotland in 300 years.



Glamis was another spot that Mary Queen of Scots called in on, as did Sir Walter Scott. King Malcolm I was wounded in battle near Glamis and was brought to the Castle, where he died. A chamber there is still named for him. He was succeeded by his grandson Duncan I, who was slain by Macbeth of "The Scottish Play" fame. The juiciest tidbit, though a myth, is that

Macbeth was killed at Glamis. While this is indeed a fun story, our guide shared with us that Shakespeare had taken artistic license with the facts.

Glamis is very much a living home. Modern evidence of everyday life sits next to the historic artifacts. Hunting trophies abound, as do additions to the 14th century section of the Castle. The room that was The Queen Mother's favorite has been left in the way that she enjoyed it, with her favorite little homey touches and photos of her grandchildren. It was this room that I remember most, because it felt as if she would step through the door at any moment.



After the tour, we took a long time wandering through the sumptuous Gardens, marveling at the bursts of color and the surprises around every corner. In a quiet section of the garden path was a sweet memorial to Princess Margaret, and we took a few moments to contemplate this.

Leith Hall – A Laird, Ladies and Long Shadows

Leith Hall may be my favorite, and this is probably because it was the first estate that I visited



when I got to Scotland, some of the most beautiful gardens I have ever been blessed to explore. I was able to wander the house and grounds in the waning light of a summer evening, and it was almost as if it all belonged to me. What a colorful group of characters that have been a part of Leith's history, too. My favorite, out of so many, is Andrew Hay, all 7 foot 2 of him. When he would kneel in church, other parishioners would be offended because he was so tall that it looked as if he were still standing.

The first portion of Leith Hall was built in starting in 1610, and it was a growing, active lairdship up until 1939, when the last two lairds died within a few months of each other, at which time it was offered to the National Trust for Scotland. For those who may not know, a Laird is a land proprietor in Scotland. Tenants would work the vast acreage for the benefit of themselves and the Laird. It was sort of a community farm, with the Laird at the head, supported by tenants and others who shared resources. An ancestor of the current Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, was one of the

many tenants who helped Leith to thrive.

We started our visit by taking a walk to the Dule (or “Hanging”) Tree where legend holds that justice was



meted out, and the tree has



apparently stood as long as Leith Hall. Then we wandered down through the fields of grazing sheep to the cemetery, where we saw the memorial to those lost in World War I. We learned that the house served as an auxiliary hospital during this period in its history. It was such a gloriously beautiful afternoon, and as the sun started to go down, I noticed that we were

not alone in our meanderings. The fields surrounding the house at Leith Hall are populated with rabbits galore, much to the delight of the children and family pets that visit the estate.

Later in our tour, we went into the house itself and learned a bit about the occupants and their lives. There was even a portrait of my beloved Fanny Kemble, who my regular readers will remember from my discussions of St. Simons Island, Georgia (she shows up in the most interesting places)! The story of the Leiths and Leith-Hays is an exciting one, with tales of duels, narrow escapes and tragic deaths on the field of battle. This seemed an appropriate time to share with us the information that Leith Hall has been featured on British television as one of the country's most haunted houses, and whether you believe in that sort of thing or not, it's quite easy to get a little jittery as the sun sets.



On a return visit, my husband and I wanted to concentrate on the gardens. It was a bit more of a grey day, but still lovely. There are protected places to sit out a rain shower while you look down the sweep of the hill toward the entrance drive. This is exactly what we did – it was a relaxing respite in a very busy weekend.



Visiting the castles and estates in Scotland is an eye-opening experience. These places have been standing since before my hometown existed; since before the formation of Jamestown. We visit homes of astounding elegance, and in the same day, we climb around on ruins that barely give an idea as to what they once were. One thing is certain – we may not be living in the lap of luxury, but we are cavorting very near it.

Recommended Websites:

- Dunnottar Castle — <http://www.dunnottarcastle.co.uk/index.cfm>
- Glamis — <http://www.glamis-castle.co.uk/>
- Leith Hall General Information and Photos
— <http://www.undiscoveredscotland.co.uk/rhynie/leithhall/index.html>
- Leith Hall Gardens — http://www.gardens-guide.com/gardenpages/_0201.htm
- Leith Hall Ghost Stories — <http://www.aboutaberdeen.com/leithhallghosts.php>