

Irvine Burns Museum – the Burns Room

‘The Story of Burns in Irvine’

Commentary – junior version – on the web

The Burns Room tells the story of Robert Burns in Irvine. Imagine yourself going back in time to more than 200 years ago – to a day in July 1781. At that time, Robert Burns farmed with his brother and father on a farm ten miles away from Irvine. The farm was called Lochlea and it was near the village of Tarbolton. One of the crops they grew was flax. When a field of flax is flowering, it makes a mass of blue.

You may know the old street in Irvine, Glasgow Vennel – perhaps you recognise the old cobbles – perhaps you’ve even walked on them. Robert Burns has arrived. He has put his bundle on the ground at his feet – in it he has a few spare clothes and belongings. He looks for lodgings, and the woman at the door offers an upstairs room which he can rent quite cheaply. A ladder took him upstairs and you needed a lantern – poor houses then didn’t have stairs, and there was no electricity either!

Robert Burns would easily make new friends in Irvine. In those days, in 1781, Irvine was not as large as today, but just as busy. A few years after this, Robert Burns wrote: “My time in Irvine was important for me. It was an adventure – my first experience of town life.”

About his work, he said: “I came to Irvine to learn the trade of processing flax. The man in charge – a relation of my mother – was a bit of a rogue – a scoundrel who was very clever at tricking people out of money.”

From flax seeds you get oil, and from the stems you get fibres, and the fibres are used to make material called linen. So if you wonder why Robert Burns came to Irvine, one reason is that in Irvine he had a relative who could show him how to get the fibres from the flax stems. Another reason is that he felt like getting away from home for a while – he was 22 years old and wanted to see other places and people.

Robert worked with the flax stems in the Heckling Shed – a dusty, boring, indoors job – there were no machines to help – it was not a fresh air job like the work on the farm. After a few months, Robert became quite depressed. He wrote: “I don’t see myself making any money at this, or getting anywhere in life. I’ve started to realise that I’m always going to be poor and unknown.”

While he was in Irvine, he also wrote two depressing poems – one called ‘Winter’ about wind, and rain, and hail, and his troubles, and the other titled ‘Prayer under Pressure of Violent Anguish’ in which he asks God either to help him through his troubles or let him die.

There is a large book in which the local doctor, Dr Fleeming, kept a note of all his visits, and it tells us that the doctor visited Robert five times in eight days. Burns was thinking, “I might even soon be dead.”

Irvine had many shops, many tradesmen, and doctors, and lawyers, and publicans, and all the different jobs you would expect in an important town. And one shop which Robert enjoyed visiting was the bookshop run by William Templeton – a well-known and well-liked Irvine man. Templeton also sold copies of the latest songs of the day, and did small printing jobs, like tickets, leaflets and programmes for concerts – he had a small printing press.

Robert Burns enjoyed reading – his school teacher had encouraged him to read all sorts of books, so he was well educated, and he had a lively mind, always interested in finding out more – so he spent some of his free time browsing through books in the shop. One book he read is a volume of poems by an Edinburgh poet named Ferguson - Ferguson had written poems in the Scots language, but had died a few years earlier at the age of only 24. Burns wrote: “I thought I’d finished with poetry, but when I read the poems of Ferguson, I became interested again – his poems inspired me to renew my efforts – I really wanted to write poems which were as good as his.” The kind bookseller allowed Robert to read anything in his shop, knowing that Burns was interested but could not afford to buy the books.

Irvine harbour was busy with ships in those days – the ships unloaded goods, which carters then transported by horse-drawn cart to other places as far away as Glasgow. One building from those days is still there today, the Ship Inn, which was owned by Provost Hamilton, whose son John became one of Robert’s good friends. Another of Robert’s new Irvine friends was a young ship’s captain named Richard Brown, a few years older than Robert. Richard Brown had been to many more places and seen much more of the world than Robert. Richard told him lots of stories of ships and life at sea, and also mentioned the girls he had met. Robert wrote: “Richard was the only man I ever met who was more foolish with women than me”. Also, Richard, like Robert, had come from a family which was not well-off, and where there was no spare cash for extras, but both Robert and Richard had enjoyed their schooldays and were interested in many things. They would often sit at the harbour and talk.

Sometimes they would go for a walk in Eglinton woods, where the Country Park is today. On one of their walks, after Robert had read some of his poems to his friend, Richard said to Robert, “Don’t you think you should send some of your poems to a magazine for publication? – they’re really good – people would read them.” And those words stuck in Robert’s mind – he said himself that Richard’s words had encouraged him to be a poet – and a few years later Robert did decide to publish his work. Some of the sheets of poems he gave to the printer are today in the Wellwood Museum.

Robert Burns’ flax work in Irvine ended suddenly and unexpectedly – at a New Year Party, in the first few minutes of 1782.

He wrote in a letter: “We were welcoming the New Year and Mrs Peacock got a bit drunk – she knocked over a candle and the whole workshop went up in flames”. Robert was immediately out of a job – no redundancy payments in those days – and he would go back to working on the farm. He said: “The work was finished. Like a true poet, I wasn’t worth sixpence”.

After the fire destroyed the workshop, Robert did not go back to the farm at once, but stayed in Irvine for a few months, till the spring. He had good friends here. Richard Brown, the sea-captain. Willie Templeton, the bookseller. John Hamilton, whose father was the Provost, and owned the Ship Inn. His friends in the Masonic Lodge. Many others whose names we just don’t know. Probably some pretty Irvine girls. Robert Burns had enjoyed his six months living in our town. Even after he left, he kept in touch with his Irvine friends.

Two of his friends started the Irvine Burns Club. One was Dr John Mackenzie, who had been the family doctor at their farm. The other was a friend of his own age, Davie Sillar, a ploughman, who was good company in the evenings, who also wrote poetry – but it wasn’t as good as Burns’ – and was good at playing the fiddle, and later set up business in Irvine. These two friends, with other local men, started this Burns Club in 1826.

The Wellwood audio-visual room was painted about fifty years ago by Edward and Elizabeth Odling. It shows Irvine in the 18th century. There is a town street on the left, the bookshop in the middle, the heckling shed on the right, the harbour and woods on the right side, and the sky above with its stars. In one picture, Burns recovers from his depression, as David Sillar plays a tune on the fiddle. The birds and animals are also pictured – there’s a thrush, two crows, and seagulls – and, away down on the right side, under the table with the quill pen, on the floor, there is a mouse hidin g in the corner. “Wee sleekit, cow’rin, tim’rous beastie, O, what a panic’s in thy breestie.”

Robert Burns had enjoyed staying in Irvine. The poems of Robert Ferguson had inspired him. Richard Brown had encouraged him. Town life had been an adventure for a 22-year old. You all know that Robert Burns was born at Alloway near Ayr, but now you know that people in Irvine can be proud that it was in Irvine that he made up his mind to be a poet.

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