

White Lady of Kinneil

Mrs Stewart told us this morning that there were plenty of ghosts at our service belonging to Kinneil House. One in particular, Lady Lilbourne, who is often seen all in white, as a ghost should be, and with white wings, fluttering on the top of the castle, from where she leaps into the sea—a prodigious leap of three or four hundred yards, nothing for a well-bred ghost. At other times she wears boots, and stumps up and down stairs in them, and across passages, and through bedchambers, frightening ladies' maids and others. We have not heard her... yet.

Letter from Maria Edgeworth, staying at Kinneil House, to her sister Honora.



Spirit photograph by William Hope

Kinneil is a small village but has plenty of history on offer. It's one of the key sites of the Antonine Wall, for example, and the restored Kinneil Estate is the site of a former Roman fortlet. More recent history is a bit more gruesome – there are rumours that Burke and Hare were among the 'Resurrectionists' who would plunder graves in the area, and it's reported to be the last place in Scotland where a witch was burned at the stake. Kinneil House, the large mansion dating from the 15th century, is the centrepiece of the area, and home to the White Lady who intrigued Maria Edgeworth.

Lady Alice Lilbourne was the wife of a General ordered by Oliver Cromwell to police Scotland, and who was stationed at Kinneil House from 1651. Alice hated Scotland – she was homesick, and her husband mistreated her. He had her locked in an attic room overlooking the Gil Burn, which cuts through the estate, and it was here, one night in a desperate attempt to escape, she jumped down 200ft into a ravine. At the time, the guards who saw her as she leap said she was wearing only a white nightgown.

Another version of the story involves Alice attempting to escape the House with one of the General's officers, who she was having an affair with. After they were caught the officer was encased alive inside a hollow tree on the estate, and she threw herself from the roof.

In the 1960s a professional ghostbuster was called to Kinneil House after eerie and mysterious sounds from within were reported by locals. It had also garnered the attention of TV news stations, but the source was quickly discovered – the echoing coos of an asthmatic pigeon.

Curse of Alloa Tower

The Erskines were a historic clan and powerful family who are most strongly associated with the Clackmannanshire and Stirlingshire areas of Scotland – their historic seat was Alloa Tower, and it was John Erskine, the 7th Earl of Mar, who started construction of Mar's Wark in Stirling. Both play an important role in this curse.

The Wark, currently a ruin, sits near the Holy Rude Church and Stirling Castle, a location in the historic capital of Scotland which shows the then importance of its owner. Erskine was appointed the guardian of both King James V, and Mary Queen of Scots, and would in his later life become Regent of Scotland.

Perhaps this was why he felt like he had the right to order the demolition of Cambuskenneth Abbey – itself another important building in Scottish history, the site of two of Robert The Bruce's parliaments – and use the rubble to build Mar's Wark, which was intended to be the principle residence of the Erskine family. After this the Abbot of Cambuskenneth, now homeless and jobless, appeared at the door of Alloa Tower to damn the Erskine bloodline with a curse

promising that the Wark would never be completed, their lands would fall into the hands of strangers, and that the family line would cease to exist.

The Abbot was, if some tellings are to be believed, a necromancer, and indeed the Erskines would go on to lose their land after backing the failed 1715 Jacobite uprising, with further ill fortune to follow. The family were plagued with rumours that Erskine had the infant King James murdered and replaced with a child from his own family - a rumour that did huge damage to the reputation of the family, as did the actions of another John Erskine, the 22nd Earl of Mar, who is most well-known now for being a ditherer – given the nickname Bobbing John for his frequent changing political stances and inability to strongly capitalise on victory in battle. Later the larger house around what remains of Alloa Tower would burn down, and three of the eight children fathered by the 7th Earl were born blind, with another dying of an opium overdose.

It wasn't until 1815 that the curse was lifted – an ash sapling, a sign indicated by the Abbot that the cloud of ruin and despair above the family's head was finally to clear, was spotted growing from the roof of the Tower.



Torryburn Witch

Between the early 1500s and early-1700s there was a wave of witch trials across Scotland – estimates put the number of people trialled as 4,000 – 6,000, before increasing urbanisation and central government control led to the decline across Europe. The Lowlands saw the majority of these outbursts, and communities around the Forth were no different. One of the most notable cases took place in Torryburn, and a sign of one woman's ordeal is still visible today.

Lilias Adie, a resident of Torryburn, was accused in 1704 of witchcraft by her neighbours, who claimed she'd used her powers to bring ill health on a fellow villager called Jean Nelson. She was put on trial before a panel of church elders, where she told a story about meeting the devil in a cornfield, accepting him as her lover and master and taking part in a 'heathenish dance'.

Lilias died in jail that night, before she was to be executed, and she was buried between the high and low tide marks in Torry Bay, her gravesite covered by a large, flat stone, which was located a few years ago by Fife Council archaeologist Dougie Spiers, and is still placed near at the end of the beach near the railway bridge. Stones like this are commonly associated with witches' burial sites, as they were used to weigh down the corpses to stop the devil reanimating them.

With her buried out with consecrated ground, the villagers of Torryburn would have been safe from any supposed witchcraft, or from any chance of Adie's 'revenant' (as demonologists called the resurrected dead) popping back into the local tavern – but for poor Lilias, she still wasn't able to rest in peace. In the early 19th century some locals, a few generations removed from the fear of witchcraft, dug her body up and sold her skull to the University of St Andrews, from where it was later stolen.



The face of Lilias Adie, digitally reconstructed by scientists from Dundee University