

Peeling back the layers

David Hopes describes how stripping off layers of paint may reveal more than just the fine detail of a statue.



Standing alone in a corner of a museum storeroom in Alloway is a small statue of Robert Burns: highly dramatised, unquestionably romantic, instantly recognisable, the sculpture is one of a large number cloned in the 19th century from the Nasmyth portrait of Burns to represent one of Scotland's most revered writers. Over the past century the statue has been painted and repainted to freshen-up its plaster curves, resulting in a heavy accumulation of paint on the surface. A once smartly dressed thirty-something poet, book and pencil in hand, has become embalmed in layers of lovingly-applied gloss, each coat burying more of the difficult detail. This statue of Burns has become an amorphous Everyman whose form survives but whose finer points have become smoothed-over and simplified. An icon has become anonymous.

Visualisation of Robert Burns Birthplace Museum, due to open in Alloway in Summer 2010

Stripping back Burns and reinterpreting the poet's birthplace is the latest challenge faced by the National Trust for Scotland, which took ownership of Burns Cottage and Museum, Burns Monument, and the Tam o' Shanter Experience visitor centre in November of last year. The opportunity to build a new museum and reinterpret nine Burns-related sites dispersed across the village was afforded by 2009 being the 250th anniversary of the poet's birth, even if the project to deliver change will not be complete until next year.

However, the real driver for the redevelopment of Burns heritage in Alloway, the place of the poet's birth just south of Ayr, was the condition of 5,500 artefacts which have been painstakingly assembled in Alloway since the early 19th century. Described as 'Scotland's literary crown jewels', the world's most significant collection of manuscripts, books, art, and memorabilia relating to the life, work and legacy of Burns was in danger of physical disintegration until the recent involvement of the Trust. Moreover, the true colour of the poet's life and the richness of his work was buried beneath decades of tired interpretation. The potential of this amazing collection to reflect the brilliance of Burns in and around the poet's birthplace is formidable, but it is not without its challenges.

One of those challenges is the nature of the collection. It should come as no

surprise to discover that the museum collection is largely paper-based – over 3,500 books and 311 manuscripts in the poet's hand represent the fruits of Burns's literary outpourings. They reaffirm that it is because of his way with words that we have rated Burns and collected so much in his name. Although these manuscripts and books are hugely important, filling a museum with them and asking the visitor to appreciate their individual value would be interpretive suicide. Aesthetically, there is a sameness to many of the manuscripts and unlocking their meaning requires effort on the part of the visitor. Some manuscripts are hard to read, and the use of Scots in many of the poems and songs can be off-putting.

Another challenge is that Burns himself, the subject matter for the new museum, is so complex yet seemingly so well known. Reinterpreting such a complicated, iconic figure whilst negotiating a course through a minefield of myths and decades of cultish attachment is a tricky business. Catering for those who know nothing about Burns as well as satisfying the avid Burnsian is also a tough balancing act.

In an attempt to overcome these barriers, the new museum – Robert Burns Birthplace Museum (RBBM) – will be selective in its use of manuscripts and books, creating displays from items across the collection to make the museum more visually interesting. We have looked to the collection to develop interpretive themes

and key messages; at RBBM interpretation will be thematic rather than chronological, a deliberate departure from the way Burns is interpreted elsewhere. Hands-on interactives will work alongside interpretive panels and object labels to provide a multi-layered approach to communicating the story of the poet's life and work. Audio points and performance will be used wherever possible to convey the vibrancy of Burns's language and to aid an understanding of, and appreciation for, Lowland Scots. Alloway was a place of beginnings for Robert Burns: it is where his life began and where we hope the visitor will be inspired to begin a journey of discovering more about the poet.

And what about the unfortunate statue of Burns? Over the next six to twelve months the layers of old paint will be removed, allowing a fresh new look under the surface. What will be revealed from the chrysalis of paint will be a figure which will hopefully intrigue, inspire and inform. Burns may yet be reborn in Alloway.

Robert Burns Birthplace Museum is scheduled to open to the public in the summer of 2010. For more information, visit the [NTS website](#).

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