

Travel Outlook

Some Scots just can never say die

By DIAHANN NADEAU
Herald Special

Perhaps the most fascinating and unusual way to do Scotland would be a ghost tour. Yes, it is quite possible to plan such a thing. The Scottish Tourist Board has a brochure listing 67 places in the country with a reputation for hauntings. These range from castles to desolate glens, with ghosts of star-crossed lovers to murderers. For those of us with a taste for the mysterious, the macabre, or the romantic, this is definitely an appealing route.

Due to its age and population Edinburgh offers the most concentrated ghost and witchery sites. A Cadies Ghost Tour is a great way to set the scene. We started with dinner at the Witchery restaurant on Castle Hill, on the Royal Mile. It is billed as the oldest, most haunted restaurant in the Old Town. The decor is marvelous: pentagrams, tarot cards, a life-size witch, and other effects of black magic; this is not the place to take a fervent Baptist!

The tour starts outside the restaurant. Adam Lyal, deceased, leads the groups. He is dressed much like Count Floyd from SCTV and he died, by hanging, in 1811 for the crime of highway robbery.

His first stop is at the 'fountain' on top of Castle Hill, right outside the Castle. It is a plaque, put up in 1894, to commemorate the spot where more than 300 people were put to death for witchcraft. This is one of the most tragic patches of ground in all of Scotland. Over a period of 250 years 4,000 people were burnt as witches in the country. But more died on Castle Hill than any other place.

The witches were strangled and then burned, in a ritual known as 'worryit.' Confession was enough to satisfy the courts and therefore thousands of people were tortured until they'd confess to anything. Lyal produced the 'pilliwinks,' a thumbscrew device most favored to begin extracting a confession. Fortunately, Scottish jurisprudence has improved substantially since those times.

One of the more interesting cases of witchcraft has to be the affair of Major Weir, known as the Wizard of West Bow. An army officer who became Captain of the City Guard, Major Weir was a very

religious man. After retiring from the Guard he devoted himself full time to his religion and began to preach. A tall, dark, and imposing figure with his black cloak and walking stick, the Major became famous for his sermons at his house in West Bow, and was nicknamed Angelical Thomas because of his seemingly saintly nature.

Suddenly one evening, at the ripe age of 70, Weir broke down during a crowded service and confessed to leading a double life, to 'committing great acts of bestiality, including incest.' He'd also made a pact with the Devil and had met him a few times.

His friends tried to persuade him to recant but he would not, and soon word spread to the authorities. In April 1670 he was tried and convicted of carnal offenses. He was sentenced to death by 'worryit.' Outside the city, or the Gallow Lee, the sentence was carried out in front of a large crowd. Weir's last words were 'I have lived as a beast, I shall die as a beast.' His walking stick, feared to have magical powers, burnt with him and twisted and turned like a snake in the fire.

Weir did not leave this world peacefully. He was said to be haunting his house and it stood empty from 1670 to 1820. Finally, a century and a half after his death, a family moved into the house, attracted by the low rent. However, things soon began moving on them and a calf's head appeared above the bed. They quickly moved out. The building was not lived in again, and was finally demolished in 1870. The area is still reputed to be haunted.

Another story concerns those grisly 'body snatchers' Burke and Hare. Edinburgh in the 19th century was famous for its medical school, and a certain Dr. Knox gave lectures on anatomy attended by hundreds of students and observers. However, schools were permitted only one body (a criminal's) a year for dissection. Supply did not meet demand and pretty soon there was a sordid trade in grave-robbing. Guard houses were built in cemeteries to try to stop the activity. (The Watchtower in St. Cuthbert's Churchyard, near the West end of Princes Street, is currently undergoing extensive restoration.)

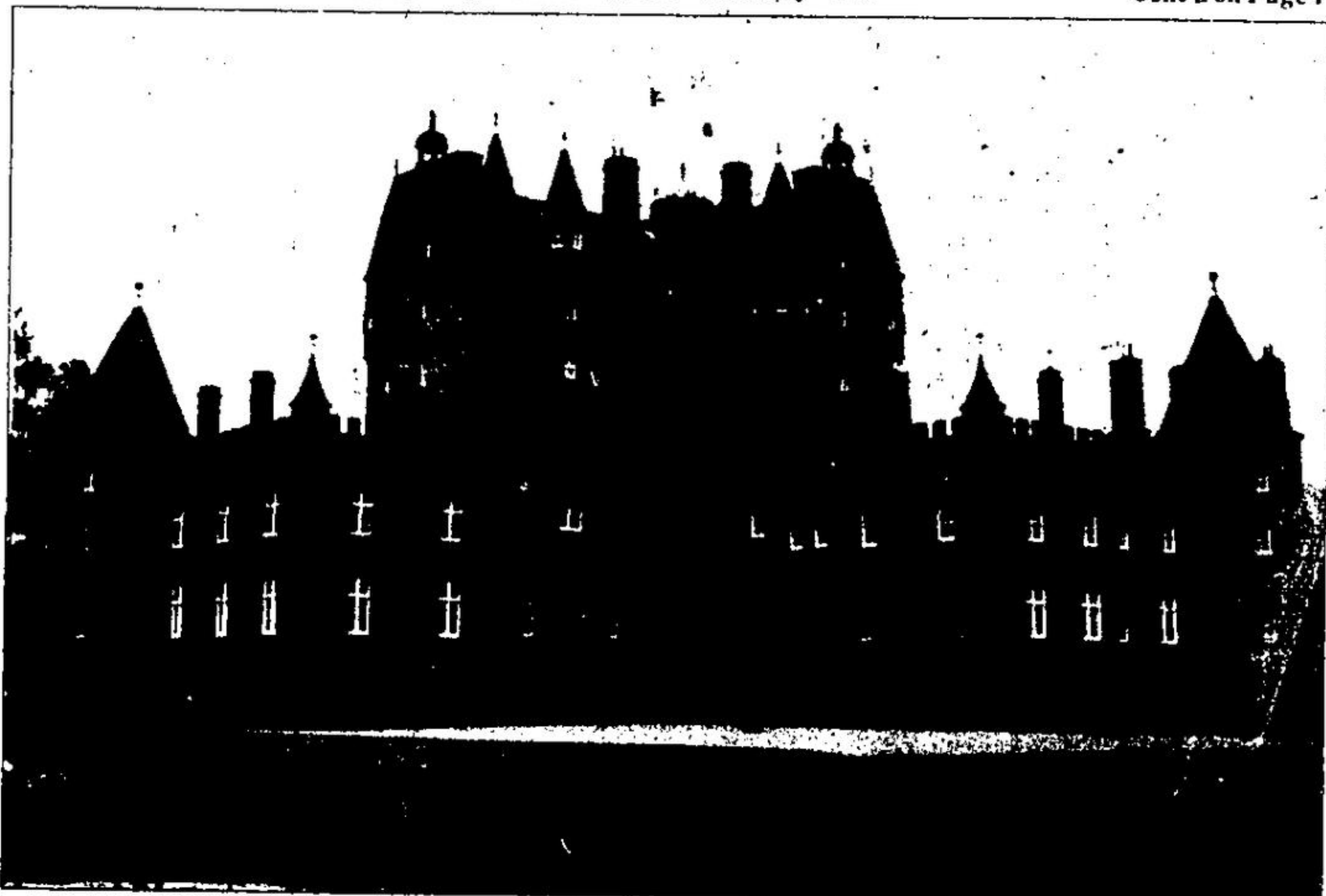
William Burke and William Hare decided to take this body snatching idea to its natural conclusion - snatch bodies before they were buried, before they were dead even. (The entrepreneurial spirit was alive and well back then.) So

they began a murder spree, killing burns and vagrants, people they believed would not be missed, they were eventually arrested, although evidence was so flimsy that the only way to get a conviction was to guarantee Hare's immunity and

safe passage from the country in return for his evidence against Burke.

There was a sold out crowd for the trial on Dec. 17, 1828. Burke was convicted, although of only

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Gruesome Glamis Castle in Scotland is rumored to have at least nine ghosts. Glamis Castle is just one area where various Scottish ghosts and ghoulies haunt. (Photo submitted)

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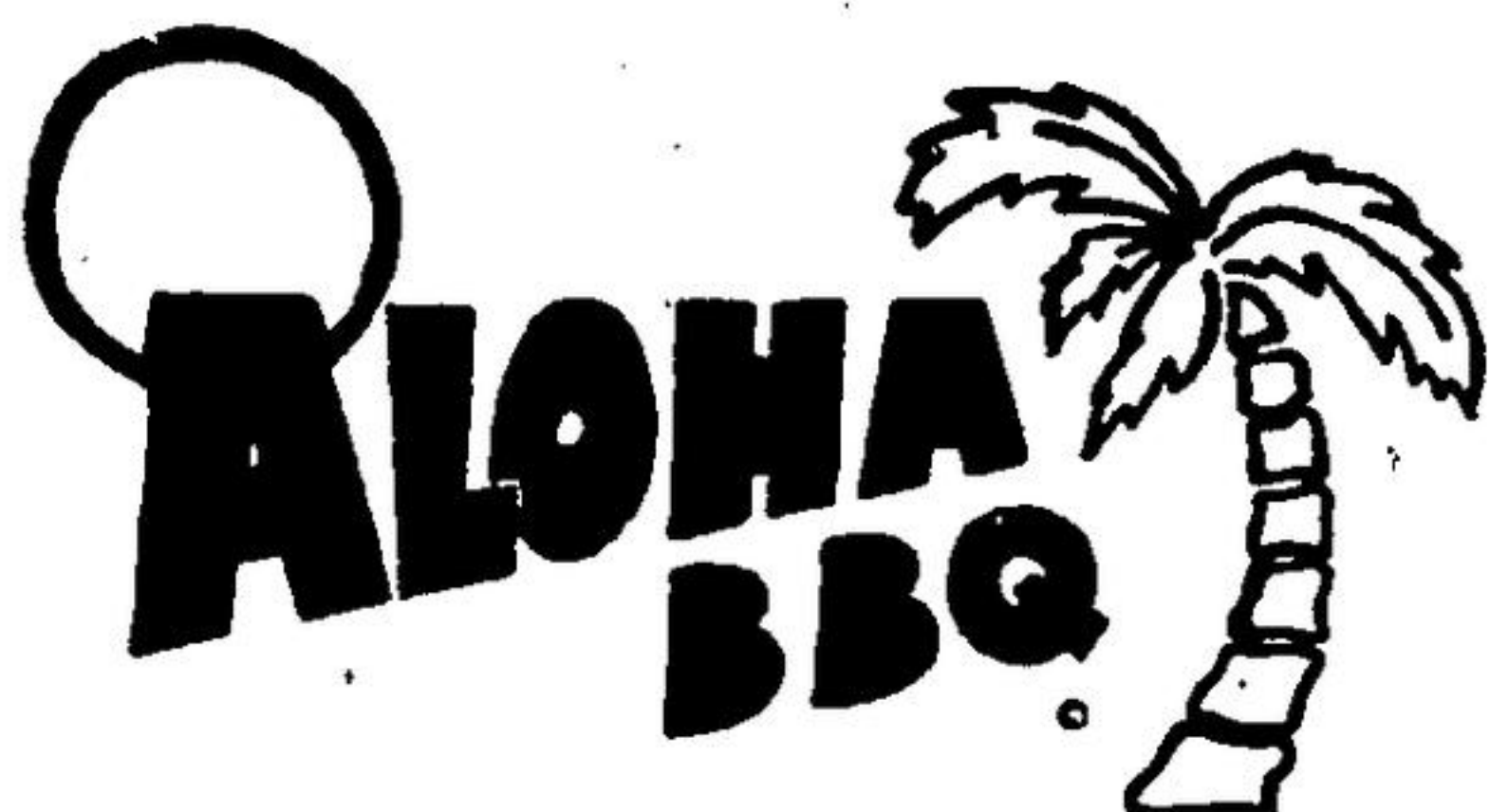
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