

Murderers, witches and things that go bump in the night ...

IN THE FINAL PART OF HER OFFBEAT WALKS ODYSSEY, ALI HOWARD STEELS HER NERVES AND HEADS TO DUMFRIES FOR A SPOOKY TOUR BACK IN TIME

I'm standing in Scotland's oldest working theatre, the Theatre Royal in Dumfries, where a bust of Robert Burns, a resident at the time the theatre opened in 1772, is looking down on me from his position on the wall. His eyes do seem to follow me. There's a distinct chill in the air, and while that could just be a lack of central heating on this out-of-hours Wednesday afternoon, there's a palpable eerie feeling.

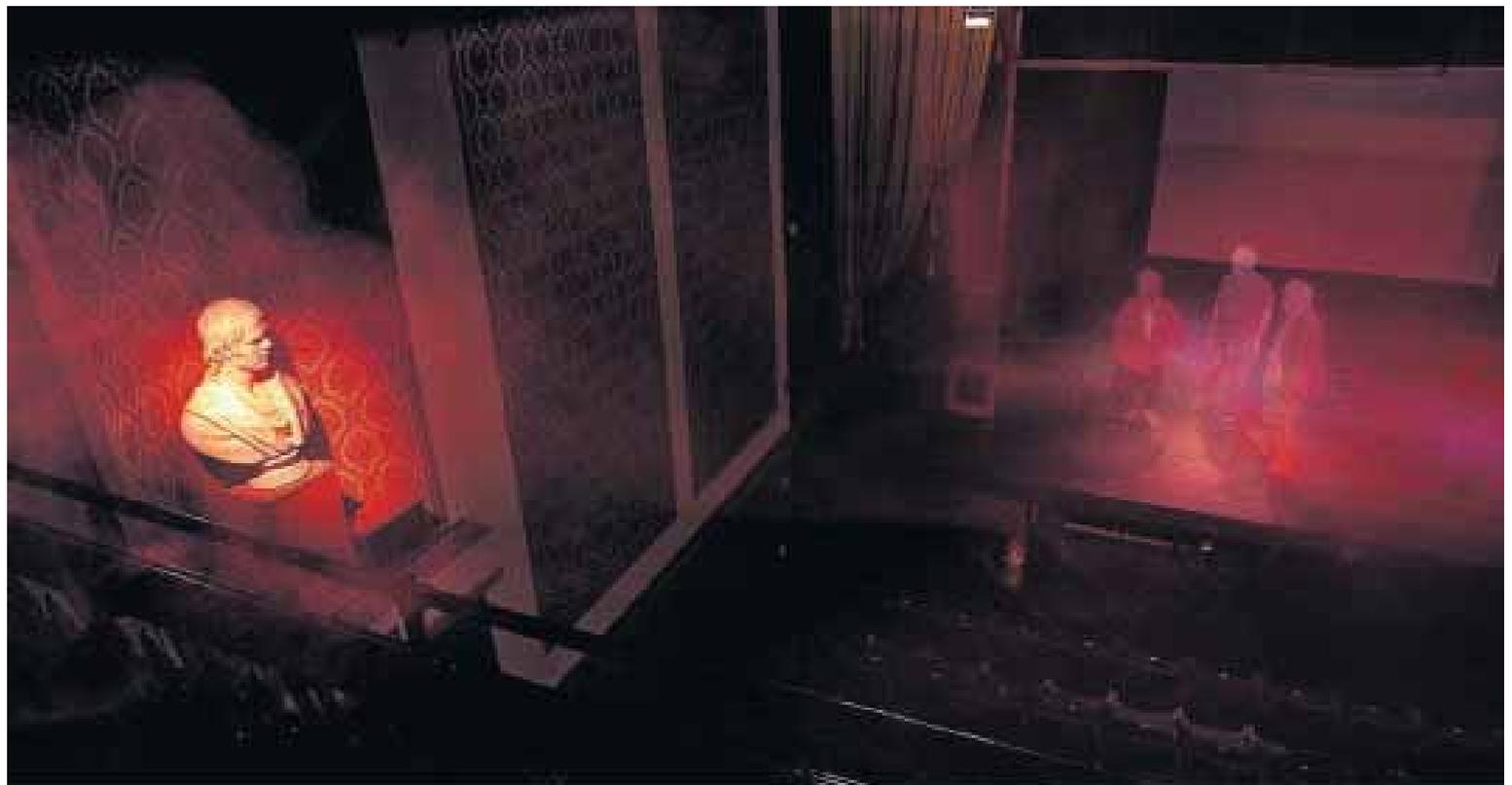
"We've heard creeping sounds, dragging sounds, had the top of our heads and shoulders touched – all manner of things like that," says John Hill, one of my guides. I'm on the Mostly Ghostly tour of Dumfries, along with my other guides, Mary Wood and Kathleen Cronie, all three of whom are also paranormal investigators.

"We've heard footsteps in various parts of the theatre and during our second investigation two of us had quite remarkable experiences," Hill continues. "I was sitting in the balcony and could smell tobacco smoke. The longer it went on, the worse it got – but nobody was smoking."

"Another member of our team had the feeling of being trapped in his seat. It was awful. So much has happened here ..." He trails off before telling me of spontaneous music playing during shows, odd happenings in the basement and actors reporting hearing strange footsteps.

It's easy to be sceptical but it does all get a bit spooky. Time to leave.

But this is just one part of the tour, which started at the town's midsteeple clock with a brief introduction to Dumfries's colourful past. It leads visitors around the town – down atmospheric dark closes, deadly quiet streets and along the river – while strange stories from Dumfries's history, both scary and otherwise, are told in animated detail. My guides, who are in gothic period costume, are passionate



about their town's heritage – particularly those stories that hint at the paranormal or reveal a darker side.

The group launched the walk on Halloween 2010 but they've been investigating haunted locations since 2008. "The walk's been well supported locally," says Cronie, "but we're trying to get the word out to the rest of Scotland. We're keen to encourage folk to think about the history, architecture and colourful characters from times gone by."

There are certainly many. We find ourselves back at the town's main square and Cronie launches into a compelling story about Burke and Hare, the infamous murderers who sold their victims' corpses to medical science. While Burke was hanged in 1829, Hare's court testimony against his partner in crime gave him immunity and the last known citing of him was in Carlisle – but not before he stopped in Dumfries.

Standing outside the local branch of Boots the pharmacy, Cronie tells me how the building, formerly a hotel – and now reportedly haunted – played host to Hare when he visited Dumfries, only to be met by 8000 residents turned angry mob ready to lynch him. Cronie paints quite a picture, urging us to imagine the scene and the roar of the crowd as they bayed for his blood and chanted "Burke him". To demonstrate, my three guides chant the phrase with fists punching the

air to the curiosity of passers-by.

Cronie and her companions carry out their paranormal investigations by working in partnership with property owners, who often call them to research the history behind their building.

"We also try to find any rational explanations," she explains, "because there's no point kidding yourself on – if it's a squeaky floorboard then that's what it is. That explanation is every bit as satisfying as an unexplained conclusion."

Their methods are low tech: no fancy equipment, just photographs, camcorders, minds open to ideas and "trigger objects" with a historical or social significance to a place. "We set them up and invite communication," says Cronie.

AS the tour continues, we move along the street to the site of the former Greyfriars monastery, where a gruesome murder involving Robert the Bruce took place, before heading behind a church to hear the sad tale of Mary Timney, the last woman to be publically executed in Scotland, on April 29, 1862. To mark the 150th anniversary of her death, the group are holding a special tour on the same day next month. It's a sombre moment in the tour.

The same mood presents at our

The Theatre Royal in Dumfries has been the site of many reported ghostly goings on

Photograph: Colin Mearns

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final stop, next to the river, to hear about the many women who were tried, convicted and executed for witchcraft 250 years ago. A walk is also being held to mark their anniversary next month on Friday 13.

"That date might appeal to some people," laughs Cronie. "But, interestingly, people have reported smelling burning peat here. Somebody else on a tour felt a tightness around their legs, like someone was holding on. I daresay a bit of suggestion is involved because you're telling a very powerful story – but you wonder because this was the place where not just these poor souls, but others, lost their lives in a similarly gruesome way."

"The telling of these stories possibly stirs something at the site as well," adds Hill. "But we always have respect when we tell it," adds Cronie. "You can be light-hearted with some of the stories but this is one of those places where it's suitably sombre. We respect what happened here – it's a tragic story."

It's a fitting end to a tour that, over the past 90 minutes, has blended history, legend and the supernatural. And with all those tales swimming about my head, I head home and sleep decidedly uneasy in my bed.

The next two ghost walks are Friday, April 13, and Sunday, April 29. The cost of the walk is £6 for Adults, £4 for concessions. Visit www.mostlyghostly.org