



The Mostly Ghostly team – John Hill, Derek McCall, Kathleen Cronie and Mary Wood – at the Midsteeple, where the Dumfries Ghost Walk starts

Dumfries will never be the same again for the brave souls who take part in the town's new ghost walks, which have been launched by paranormal investigation group Mostly Ghostly.

**Andrea Thompson** reports on her spooky night exploring the dark heart of Dumfries

**Photography by Pete White**

# THE DARK SIDE OF DUMFRIES

There was a chill in the air, an eerie wind blowing along the rain-drenched High Street, whipping up leaves and sending cans scattering 'bump-in-the-night'-style across the cobbles, and the sky grew darkly ominous as the last few patches of light disappeared. Up ahead, the iconic Midsteeple had a foreboding air about it as four characters, dressed all in black, emerged from the shadows to the heavy chimes of the clock...

Dumfries was at its atmospheric after-dark best and was certainly ready for the Ghost Walk – even if those of us taking part weren't.

Fortunately, I was in good company, with lots of familiar faces – including the Provost, Jack Groom, and his wife, Kate; Susan Garnsworthy and Alan Thomson from dgArts; VisitScotland's Sharon Makepeace, and our very own Challenge Alison – among

the first group ready to experience the new Dumfries Ghost Walk.

The four figures who stepped out of the shadows revealed themselves as Mostly Ghostly's Kathleen Cronie, Derek McCall, John Hill and Mary Wood, virtually unrecognisable in their period costumes, which helped set just the right tone for a walk on the dark side, covering 800 years of Dumfries's rich, turbulent history. What we were to discover that night has made the town a more fascinating and intriguing place for many of us.

From the relatively safety of the Plainstones, where we learned the locations of the town's first jail and the tollbooth vaults, and what happened to an unfortunate gossip in 1668, in Derek's Crime and Punishment section of the walk, we were led down the



where Mary gave a unique account of the murder of Robert The Bruce's rival, John 'The Red' Comyn, before the high altar in 1306.

The stories of the last public hangings of a man and woman in Scotland, told down a dark alleyway off Buccleuch Street, were related with sympathy, before we were led down to the Whitesands for a powerful and dramatic conclusion to the tour.

As the Nith raged behind us, we were told of Dumfries's witches – nine women who were convicted of witchcraft and executed by strangling and burning – on the Whitesands.

We were asked to imagine the horrors of what happened to the women, and there was a moment's silence to remember what Kathleen described as "the blackest day in Dumfries's history" – April 13, 1659, when the women were executed at 2pm.

I have since learned that a number of people on the Halloween night ghost walk a few days later reported smelling burning peats at the Whitesands during this presentation...

Kathleen says the aim of the ghost walks are not just to provide a fright-fest, but an entertaining and informative way to learn more about the town's fascinating history and impressive architecture. I think Mostly Ghostly has certainly succeeded, and the walk, which the group has spent more than a year researching and developing, and the members' own unique, professional presentations, provide a darkly intriguing experience. I for one can't wait to go again! D&G

■ *There are two ghost walks on Friday, November 26, at 7pm and 9pm, leaving from the Plainstones at the Midsteeple. Tickets are £6 for adults, £4 for children, concessions for OAPs and students. A family ticket (two adults and up to three children) is £16 and there's a 10 per cent discount for private bookings for groups over 20 (based on adult price). See [www.mostlyghostly.org](http://www.mostlyghostly.org) or call 07751 722008.*



Inga McVicar, Kate Groom, Julie Hutchinson, Andrea Thompson, Provost Jack Groom and Alison Bell on the tour. Above: Derek and Kathleen get into character to recount stories of Dumfries's dark past

claustrophobic and certainly spooky Shakespeare Lane, where it wasn't hard to imagine the horrors of the two cholera epidemics which ravaged the town.

Shivers ran down my spine as we gathered in the alleyway at the side of The Theatre Royal. Scotland's oldest working theatre is a favourite spot for Mostly Ghostly because of its spectral activity and while we didn't venture inside, accounts of the investigators' own terrifying experiences gave us plenty to think about. I think we all felt the spooky vibes emanating from the building by the time John had revealed many of its ghostly goings-on.

English Street won't be the same again once you visit after dark having heard of its haunted happenings (Can anyone else hear the sounds of horses' hooves?); while at the fountain in the High Street, Kathleen whipped us into a frenzy, baying for the blood of a one-time resident of the King's Arms

Hotel – none other than the infamous bodysnatcher William Hare.

We were transported back to 1829 and the biggest riot ever seen in Dumfries, when 8,000 people gathered outside shouting: "Burke him! Burke him!" – demanding that Hare also suffer the same fate as his partner in crime, William Burke, who was hanged after Hare turned King's evidence against him.

Kathleen also revealed the story of the spirits which haunt the top floor of Boots, scaring staff by opening keypad-locked doors.

Irish Street was, for me, one of the spookiest locations on the walk, and I felt distinctly uneasy as we were told of the strange goings-on at the former Dinwiddie Grieve Ltd printing works. There was no-one else in the street apart from our group, but I don't think we were alone...

One of the most fascinating parts of the walk was the visit to the site of Greyfriars Kirk,



To be in with a chance of winning a pair of adult tickets to one of Mostly Ghostly's Dumfries Ghost Walks, send your name, address and daytime telephone number (please write clearly) to: Mostly Ghostly/Dumfries & Galloway Life 37 competition, Dumfries & Galloway Life, Media House, Barras Lane, Dalston, CA5 7LX before the closing date of 17.12.10. For full rules see page 18.

