

For Hallowe'en... Tales from the Outland(er)ish Crypt Keeper

A Hallowe'en kind of story...

As a workplace location, a graveyard is perhaps not the first choice for many people, and one might imagine that being surrounded by the dead on a daily basis may be a sobering experience. However, for one man, it is a labour of love and a joy to go to his office situated just inside the gates of Greyfriars Kirkyard, Edinburgh, in the aptly named "Bobby's Bothy," after that most famous of faithful furry friends, Greyfriars Bobby.

Next to the Bothy, is a brand new, beautifully situated and lovingly tended monument to the wee dug. The Bothy is where I met the charismatic, and redoubtable Jamie Corstorphine, whom I have dubbed *The Crypt Keeper* of Greyfriars Kirkyard, but who is actually the Manager of the popular City of the Dead Tours and passionate protector of the historical monuments and land

under his care, in this most famous of cemeteries.

Indeed, as you enter the gates, on a beautiful, warm, sunny day at the beginning of autumn, it is easy to see why Jamie feels such contentment, surrounded by verdant lawns, ancient buildings and monuments, that remind us not only of the transience of life, but also the past lives of those with fascinating stories to tell. Greyfriars Kirkyard is a popular tourist attraction and on the day of my visit, it is "Open Gates" day where visitors of all ages have come to bask in Scotland's rich and often gory history and to see where many of Edinburgh's famous people are laid to rest. As a truly gothic landmark, it is second to none.

Inside the Bothy, you can be forgiven for feeling that you are entering a fairground House of Horrors, adorned, as it is, by grinning skulls, gazing sightlessly at visitors, allegedly cursed dolls from around the world, accused of causing fires and mayhem to their owners, clown heads and other weird curios to suit every phobia. There are stacks of books, many written by the owner of City of the Dead Tours and award-winning author, Jan Andrew Henderson, whose research, personal experiences and documented experiences of people joining his tours, have brought the terrifying story of The Mackenzie Poltergeist to life.

Other books include Harry Potter and, I am honoured to say, right next to them, are copies of my own young teen novel, "PJ and the Paranormal Pursuers – The Mackenzie Poltergeist." I am in good company having drawn inspiration from Greyfriars and its most infamous reputed spook as the source of my writing, as Jan Andrew Henderson notes in his own non-fiction book, "The Ghost that Haunted Itself."

Many famous and venerated authors have been similarly inspired by things discovered in the Kirkyard. He recounts how Charles Dickens misread a tombstone inscribed with the name 'Scroggie' from which his character Scrooge emerged; Robert Louis

Stevenson, who enjoyed the quietude of the cemetery to create Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde; Bram Stoker visited when writing Dracula; Mary Shelley, whose book Frankenstein was inspired by the notorious graverobbers or *resurrection men*, who dug up bodies to sell for medical science.

Of course, who could forget that JK Rowling's Voldemort (real name Tom Marvolo Riddle) might have been, as she acknowledges, subconsciously created from a name etched on the tombstone of one Thomas Riddell, to which young Harry Potter fans flock, in the blurring of fact and fiction, seeking Voldemort's grave; a matter which Jamie, our Crypt Keeper, finds a tad irksome.

"I mean, there is so much real history to be found here, and people come to me and ask where Voldemort is buried!" Jamie shakes his head and rolls his eyes. "He's a fictitious character! How about, you know, George Buchanan, the man who taught James V, and we've got James Hutton's memorial stone, the father of modern geology. I mean, he basically rewrote *time*, and they come to me and ask me where the *wizard* is buried." Jamie sighs, but concedes, "I guess it is just the new generation and if that's bringing people to the Kirkyard and it gets them to learn, it is a segue to learning about things." Jamie speaks with pride about his involvement with World Heritage and his work with Dr Susan Buckham, who specialises in the study of historic graveyards, focusing on post-Reformation Scottish burial sites. "World Heritage is fantastic, and do things with underprivileged kids. Dr Buckham brings groups of kids and I talk to them about the Mackenzie Poltergeist, and we get them in at Hallowe'en, when I'll spook them out. They just love it. Some of these kids... well a night out at the cemetery at Hallowe'en is like a holiday for many of them. They take in so much information and they're so totally mesmerised. It's great for education, because the history comes out. If you give people a thirst for knowledge then they discover the truth about things."

So, who is Sir George Mackenzie, and why is he reputed to

haunt Greyfriars Kirkyard? “Bloody” or *Bluidy* Mackenzie was the 17th century King’s Advocate in Edinburgh. He prosecuted, in the name of King Charles II, the Covenanters, supporters of the Presbyterian Church in Scotland who refused to conform to the established Church. Following the Battle of Bothwell Bridge, he imprisoned 1200 Covenanters within a gated area of Greyfriars Kirkyard, where, exposed to the elements, disease, starvation and torture, many of them died, with others executed, their heads placed on spikes in the Grassmarket. Some submitted, and were released, and of the remaining 250, two hundred of them, shackled in the hold, died when the ship carrying them to slavery in America smashed into rocks in Orkney during a storm. Fifty prisoners escaped, of whom most were recaptured and shipped to slavery in Jamaica or New Jersey.

At his death in 1691, Mackenzie was entombed in the family Mausoleum in Greyfriars Kirkyard, a few metres away from the still gated, and locked, Covenanters Prison, which, subsequent to the imprisonment of the Covenanters, now also contains a number of other family mausoleums flanking each side of a lawned path. The reason for Mackenzie’s unrest is often cited as his anger at the proximity of his interment to those who perished under his instructions.

Many people believe that the Mackenzie Poltergeist activity is centred in the Mackenzie Mausoleum. This, however, as Jamie is at pains to emphasise, is not the case. “It’s impossible for attacks on people to occur in the Mackenzie Mausoleum because the public have no access to it. We’ve documented the activity, since 1999, as happening in the Black Mausoleum within the Covenanter’s Prison.” He jokily explains this to some tourists in the office, “Only we have access and what better way to document what’s happened than from people with different backgrounds, different circumstances, going on a tour, who witness activity.” He laughs, “You’re the guinea pigs and you pay us to be attacked! What a great way to make

money!" More seriously, though, he explains to the enraptured tourists that they have a wide range of results. Sometimes there are months when nothing ever happens at all, but then you can have other nights when there are multiple occurrences of apparently paranormal activity.

Jamie recounts for his audience, the famous story of the homeless tramp in 1999 who broke into the Mackenzie Mausoleum for shelter and fell through the floor, disturbing a coffin below. The body didn't fall out, but the coffin was cracked. A few days later, came the first recorded instances of strange happenings in the Covenanters' Prison.

Jamie continues, "Later, in 2003, a fifteen-year-old boy, Sonny Devlin, broke into the Mausoleum, because that's what fifteen-year-olds do when they're bored, isn't it? Yeah, they break into a Mausoleum, rip the head off a corpse, and run around the graveyard trying to scare their friends." He shakes his head incredulously. "Well, it worked, scaring a lot of other people too. That's when things really started heating up in the prison on tours, where there would be maybe up to eight attacks or interactions. It ranges from bite and scratch marks, people being pushed or kick punched, people being knocked out cold, like when a hypnotist says '*sleep*' and you just go down, *boom!* That's why Edinburgh Council locked the gates originally. There was a spate of eleven ambulances called in the space of three months in early 1999 for people walking in the prison area."

It was the owner of City of the Dead Tours, Jan Andrew Henderson who started researching it in 1999. He lived in a flat that oversees the Kirkyard, where he, and others in the block experienced strange happenings, including an unexplained fire that destroyed much of his research material gathered on the Mackenzie Poltergeist. Jamie explains "Jan was originally a tour guide with Auld Reekie Tours and later started his own company with a friend. They started City of the Dead Tours with £200 and fliers, stood for hours in the snow and the

rain, with people not showing up. From there, we now have two prime locations (Greyfriars and the South Bridge Vaults, also reputedly haunted), and we've survived another plague, so it's all good!

"Jan began writing a book about the Mackenzie Poltergeist, and then, because of the incidents, Edinburgh Council locked the gates. Jan asked for access and said he wanted to take people in and complete his research, but the Council refused. Not inclined to take no for an answer, Jan managed to persuade the Council to give him the keys. And here we are 22 years later."



Jamie with Graham McTavish and Sam Heughan Photo courtesy of Jamie Corstorphine Photography

When asked if he has seen or experienced the Mackenzie Poltergeist himself, Jamie explains that while they have no evidence to link the incidents with Mackenzie, the phenomenon began, and intensified after the tramp, and later, Sonny Devlin desecrated the Mausoleum. He concedes that there is certainly some phenomenon in there that isn't human, but he hasn't seen, or been affected by a ghost. He said: "There are one or two of our guides who don't want to go in. They'll take people in and let them go into the Black Mausoleum, but they will stand outside. We've no idea why the activity began in the Covenanters' Prison after the events of 1999, because the 'Black Mausoleum' actually belongs to the Dundas family, with no connection and two hundred years apart."

So, what exactly happens to people in the tomb? Jamie explained that most reports come from the back of the tomb, when people, whilst listening to the guide, often find that they've been forced into the corner without being aware of it. Psychologists put it down to a state of high alert and being almost in a hypnotic trance and the power of suggestion.

Jamie isn't convinced and he certainly disagrees with psychologists' suggestion that people scratch themselves in

the Mausoleum. "They can't scratch themselves, not in a situation like that. There's no way. The three scratches, the welts, can appear anywhere on the body, even under five or six layers of clothing in the winter. They disappear after about twelve hours, even when blood is drawn. Victims say it isn't sore; it's like a tingling. Some say it's red hot, others say it's ice cold. Either way it's a dead giveaway that you're about to be interacted with and it's something you can't stop. It's would be interesting to get Derren Brown's take on it. He's been on the tour before. There are so many theories; the pheromone theory, an accumulation of energy. Dead people is another theory. Living people is a theory that I deny strongly at every opportunity."

On the real Sir George Mackenzie, Jamie has strong views. "I'm no historian, but recently I have been researching George Mackenzie as a person, as an individual. The legend is of *Bluidy Mackenzie*, with an image of this beast of a man, who in practice, never visited the prisoners here. He was a lawyer, King's Advocate, in his office, but he did sign off that the prisoners should be kept here. It was the King's soldiers who captured them. Mackenzie didn't come out here for an eight-hour shift and had a lot more going on in his life than a bunch of people who wanted their prayer books back. He was doing a job in a time you were either for or against the King. If you were against, it was treason and you would be executed. You didn't have a choice. It was a different time and we can't compare it with now. There were fifty years of killing and a turbulent period. He did more good in his life than bad. He was one of the reasons that witch trials were abolished in Scotland; he even defended some of the Covenanters in court. He was a very educated man, backed into a corner by the King. He founded the Advocates' Library in Edinburgh, he wrote the laws of Scotland and no doubt, he wasn't going to throw all that away, just to say, '*I don't agree with you, Charles, sorry.*' But then everything was done in his name and that's why he is known as *Bluidy Mackenzie*."

It's clear that Jamie loves the history and legends that surround him in his most unusual place of work, and even the story of how he got here, is tinged with a suggestion of synchronicity, or meaningful coincidence. "I've been with the company for fifteen years. It was Jan's book that brought me here, "The Ghost that Haunted Itself." I read it for the first time in 2001 and was taken aback by this Mackenzie Poltergeist and back then, I was really interested in the supernatural. I couldn't put the book down and thought, *Wow, I have to go through to Edinburgh.* I did just that, and there is a side story to that about how my wife, Charlotte and I got in contact again after losing touch when we left school. We've known each other since we were twelve and this Company got us back together in a weird kind of way. Charlotte was Jan's business partner and co-owner in the company until she left in 2018 to start up her own bespoke tour company, Celtic Heritage Connections. She's a "Historian of Death" and Ancestry Researcher as well. I never thought for a minute I would be doing tours for the company back in 2001 when I first read the book, let alone running the company. It's pretty surreal to this day to have access to all this wonderful history and still talk about it. I don't see this as a job. I do it because I love talking about Greyfriars and the vaults."



Jamie Corstorphine The Outlanderish Cryptkeeper

The Church doesn't seem too perturbed about the presence of City of the Dead Tours, or the suggestion of a poltergeist. "We have a great relationship with the Church after 22 years. We don't do Sunday Services and they don't do Ghost Tours, so you know, we have a good understanding. Richard, the Minister, is fantastic. At Hallowe'en, he puts a dummy in the Church window, so that it looks like someone looking out. Great sense of humour, fantastic minister, really nice guy. The Church understands that Greyfriars has a multitude of uses, with over a million people coming through the gates every year."

Those familiar with City of the Dead Tours, and Jamie, will perhaps have seen an image on Facebook and other Social Media with two very famous faces, Sam Heughan and Graham McTavish (Jamie Fraser and Dougal MacKenzie of the *Outlander* series, and lately, the Starzplay Scottish Travelogue, *Men in Kilts*), who both visited Greyfriars whilst filming the latter.

It was Charlotte who appeared on the programme to show the stars around the Black Mausoleum. Jamie's mum had passed away only two days previously and he didn't feel he could do the programme justice at that point. Not that he didn't make an appearance, but you might not have recognised him. "The producer asked what we had in the office to scare Graham. Sam had written this in to the show, which was nice of him, as I hadn't felt able to talk to camera on the day. Graham was the only one who didn't know what was going on. I put on the long black leather coat the tour guides wear, a plague doctor mask and cloth to cover as much skin as I could. Graham and Sam were told to stand still for a promotional shot. The cameras are rolling and they have to just look down the camera. That made sure Graham's attention was diverted away. I couldn't see a thing and I stumbled out from behind the wall. I had one chance to get a genuine reaction of fear and headed for him. I'd asked the producer if I could grab him and he gave the go ahead. When I grabbed Graham, he jumped and swore but he was absolutely lovely about it. Sam, was just being Sam, winding him up. Now I call myself the *Six-Foot Dead Penguin*, after the beak shaped mask I was wearing! I've been seen by millions around the world and nobody knows who I am.

"Charlotte was an avid fan of *Outlander*, but I never watched it until I was in *Men in Kilts* and I binge watched it. Now I'm a fan girl!" So, does Jamie count Sam and Graham as personal friends now? "Absolutely, they're my personal friends. It's just that they don't know it yet!"

So Hallowe'en is approaching and Jamie and the team are gearing up for their annual spook-fest of seasonal tours.

Graveyards and ghosts might seem a morbid fascination, but one thing we can say; Greyfriars Kirkyard is the liveliest home for the dead, you may ever encounter.

Jacqui Dempster is the author of the young teens' novel, "PJ and the Paranormal Pursuers – The Mackenzie Poltergeist" available from Amazon, Waterstones and other retailers. Signed copies available at Greyfriars Kirkyard, Edinburgh.



Photo Jamie Corstorphine Six Foot Dead Penguin courtesy of Jamie Corstorphine Photography