

WeekendsOut

Oozing with history on the banks of the Tay

Historic Dunkeld has loads to offer the discerning traveller – and literary greats, writes David McVey

DUNKELD lies right on the geological and cultural frontier of the Highland Line, where the Tay threads elegantly through the Pass of Dunkeld. There was a monastery at Dunkeld, perhaps founded by St Columba himself, and centuries later his relics were gathered there. They have now been lost but, in the 12th century, the monastery was replaced by a cathedral, with its own Bishop of Dunkeld. The cathedral occupies a glorious tranquil spot by the River Tay. The shell is maintained by Historic Scotland, but the choir is restored and remains in use as the parish church. Dunkeld House, west of the cathedral, was a residence of the Dukes of Atholl, who owned much of the surrounding land. There were three Dunkeld Houses: Queen Anne stayed as a guest in the first in 1703; Queen Victoria dropped in on the second, while the third, built in 1900, is now a hotel. Dunkeld has seen a lot of fighting. During the civil wars, Royalist leader Montrose used it as a base. In the 1689 Jacobite Rising, an army of Highland Jacobites, led by the unpleasant Viscount Dundee, defeated government forces at Killiecrankie. Dundee himself was a casualty, but the Jacobites descended on Dunkeld, which was defended by a small government army. The subsequent Battle of Dunkeld was brutal, with shootouts in the streets and buildings destroyed. The Jacobites were driven off, leaving hundreds dead and a town in ruins. The rising was quashed the next year, but meantime, Dunkeld folk were left to bury the dead and rebuild their town. Many of the small houses survive from that time, thanks to the



National Trust for Scotland, which has restored 20 of them. In one is The Ell Shop (an ell is an old Scottish measurement, just longer than a yard). Markets maintained a standard ell to guard against cheating – Dunkeld's Ell can be inspected on the wall outside the shop. A bridge over the Tay at Dunkeld came a cropper in the early 1600s and for 200 years, the locals made do with ferries. In 1766, a ferry capsized and six people drowned. Thomas Telford was hired to build a new bridge, which still stands today. Neighbouring Birnam is essentially a Victorian creation; its solid stone buildings date from the arrival of the railway in 1856.

Dunkeld and Birnam Station still survives and in its early days it brought large numbers of southern visitors to the area including confirmed Scotophile John Everett Millais, one of BBC2's Dangerous Romantics. He stayed at Rumbling Bridge on the Braan, a river which joins the Tay opposite Dunkeld; The Sound of Many Waters and St Martin's Summer are among paintings inspired by the Braan. Millais was also a keen angler. His fishing buddy Mr Potter was another Englishman who brought his family, including daughter Beatrix, to the area for summer holidays. Today, Birnam has a Beatrix Potter Garden and next to it is the

superb arts centre which has an exhibition, bookshop, cafe, theatre, exhibitions space and lots of Potterabilia. It's worth a visit even although the modern building contrasts refreshingly with the surrounding Victorian solidity. Oh, and there's that earlier English writer: "Macbeth shall never vanquished be, until Great Birnam Wood to High Dunsinane Hill Shall come against him." Some suggest Shakespeare passed this way en route to Aberdeen in 1601. If he did, perhaps a local suggested: "Why not write a play about the boy Macbeth?" Macbeth is about as historically accurate as Braveheart, but there is a Birnam Wood and the

historical Macbeth did murder King Duncan and afterwards slew Duncan's father, Crinan, the Abbot of Dunkeld. From the railway station, a path leads to the top of Birnam Hill. It's one of many waymarked routes around the forests of Dunkeld, including the Fungarth Walk, taking you to the Scottish Wildlife Trust centre at Loch of the Lowes – osprey country. You can watch the strictly guarded nest from the hide or get a close-up view on the webcam. Dunkeld, just off the A9, is served by trains, coaches and local buses, and has something for everyone. Macbeth, Shakespeare, Millais and Potter can't all be wrong.



Soak up the wonders of the wilderness

Want to go wild in Perthshire? Then check out what Highland Safaris has to offer, writes Susan Welsh

NOW that's something you don't get every day – the chance to go on safari. According to the dictionary, the word safari means an overland journey by hunters, and while it refers usually to Africa, the one I undertook was in deepest Perthshire as a guest of Highland Safaris. The company offers a variety of 4x4 Land Rover trips which promise a day of fun and discovery for all ages. These range from an autumn-watch safari, when you can hear the roar of the rutting red deer and see Perthshire put on a colourful display, to mountain, cycle and walking safaris where you're taken by Land Rover to the top of a mountain and given nature and track notes to help find your way down. There are also opportunities to have a go at off-road driving, something I'd been keen to try.

Operating within 250,000 acres of prime estate, we met our kilted guide, Sandy MacGill, at the Safari Lodge, a four-star visitor attraction which includes a farm, gift shop and gold and gem panning centre in the village of Dull, which is not far from Pitlochry. Sandy was formerly head guide at Blair Castle and his knowledge of history, along with his passion for the great outdoors, made him the perfect guide. He also has the patience of a saint which, given my terrible attempts at off-roading, was probably just as well. Suffice to say, it's a lot harder than the boys on Top Gear make it look, and allowing the engine to do the hard work for you takes some getting used to, too. During our two-hour trip, the Land Rover climbed thousands of feet along private hill roads and tracks, stopping at points to allow us to get out and use



binoculars to get a closer look at the wildlife. Watching hawks circle overhead while they look for prey in the fields below is pretty exciting – and much easier when you have someone like Sandy showing you where to look. The stops also let us enjoy some breathtaking vistas, of which there are many in this largely unspoiled wilderness, while tucking into home-made shortbread and hot coffee provided by Sandy. The safari was a wonderful way to spend a morning, and reaching the hill tops in such a leisurely manner was a real pleasure compared to when

you have to reach them under your own steam. Currently, Highland Safaris offer a festive de-stressing experience to be savoured either before or after the big day. A Day Out of the City offers a choice of safari, including an alpine adventure, a photo safari with renowned field naturalist, photographer and safari ranger Polly Pullar, a fine-dining safari on which you enjoy gourmet food in a mountain bothy, and a spa safari with time out on the hills, fabulous food and then treatments at Atholl Palace. **For further information call 01887 820071 or visit www.highlandsafaris.net.**



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