

Historic Scotland podcast:

Series 2, Episode 5 transcript

Chapter 1

Sarah's intro:

Hello, Sarah here. This week we're at Smailholm Tower. I've been really looking forward to this one. We recorded the episode in January in the middle of a snowstorm. It was such a romantic and cold setting, but it was a beautiful sunny day, so it was stunning. I hope you enjoy listening and remember, as an Historic Scotland member, you've got access to this exclusive member-only version, which includes some behind-the-scenes content at the end. You can hear Jill talk about lacewing flies. Trust me, it's worth hanging on for. Enjoy.

Hello and welcome to the Historic Scotland podcast. My name's Sarah MacGillivray. I'm an actor and writer with a passion for people, place and story.

Each episode, we travel to a different site, chat to the people that live, work and take care of it, and unearth its beautiful, haunting and surprising story.

Today we're at Smailholm Tower, discovering more about the life of one of Scotland's most famous individuals and the location that inspired him. We're chatting to Jill van Millingen, Regional Collections Manager at Historic Scotland.

Jill:

He was a romantic writer of Scottish history and he almost invented Scotland as we think of it today and the idea of tartan and all the pageantry that goes with it.

Sarah:

We're also hearing from volunteer John Simpson.

John:

He was a famous author. He learned all the stories about the Borders that inspired him for his writing of his Border Ballads, which is world renowned.

Chapter 2

01:45

Sarah:

Smailholm Tower is nestled in the Scottish Borders. It's a place that for reasons I can't quite articulate feels magical and otherworldly. The tower itself sits on a rock surrounded by undulating lush green land that stretches as far as the eye can see.

What a view. This is incredible. I tell you, if I was going to live in a fortified home, this is where I'd want to live.

The sky is huge, and the wind that whips around the tower feels like it whispers stories of the past. It's those stories that shaped the imagination of a young boy. And it's this young boy that would shape the imagination of us all. Because that boy was Sir Walter Scott. And this was his home. This is John, and he's been volunteering here for over 35 years.

John:

As I say, it started there in 1990. I've covered every site in the Borders.

Sarah:

Wow. The Borders seems to... It's got a very distinctive, like, character. And it's got very much its own stories and traditions. It feels very much like it's its own part of the distinct personality.

John:

Very much so. And you can imagine all these years, the folklore. And this is what inspires Sir Walter Scott.

Chapter 3

03:05

Sarah:

Smailholm Tower was built in the later 15th century by the Pringle family. At the time, this part of the Scottish Borders was a violent frontier zone. It was full of Anglo-Scottish warfare and shifting loyalties. The tower was not a grand residence but a fortified home – thick stone walls with narrow windows, a vaulted basement for storage and a hall above where a family would live.

I'm minding my head.

John:

Do mind your head.

Sarah:

I am, I'm on it.

John:

Do mind your head.

Sarah:

Which way do you go? Straight ahead?

John:

Straight ahead.

Sarah:

We're coming in to get a tour. So the family who first owned this and who built it, they were the Pringle family, is that correct? And why did they build it, and why here?

John:

The outlook. You know, as I say, look at a sort of crop, you know, a rocky outlook. So they would see their enemies coming from all over.

Sarah:

And this would have been built as a fortress, as somewhere they could defend.

John:

It was a fortified home.

Sarah:

A fortified home.

John:

With a bank and wall all round it.

Sarah:

Yeah.

John:

That was a bank and wall.

Sarah:

Right. And the Pringles, were they an important family in the area?

John:

Oh, yeah.

Sarah:

Yeah. And then what happened? So what's the sort of... so they were, the Pringles were here for a long time and then did it change hands many times?

John:

I'm not sure exactly how many times it did change hands.

Sarah:

By the 17th century, as tensions across the Borders declined, the tower's defensive role diminished. The Pringles eventually moved and the tower fell into partial ruin.

And would it have been in a sort of more ruined state when it first came into their hands?

John:

Yeah, because it would have to be, it would be empty. Then, of course, it'd come into the state. Come into Historic Scotland's care, as you'll find most of the properties in it. Well, Hermitage, Smailholm, Melrose, Jedburgh, Dryburgh... they're all in the care of Historic Scotland now.

Chapter 4

04:55

Sarah:

It was around 1773 when our protagonist of this episode, Sir Walter Scott, came to the tower. He's two years old and he's just contracted what was likely polio, leaving him with a permanent weakness in his right leg. Fearing for his health in the air of Edinburgh's Old Town, his family sends him to recover in the Borders. And it was here, at Smailholm Tower, that much of his early childhood unfolded.

Scott lived with his grandparents on the farm at Sandyknowe, in the shadow of the tower. From the fields he could see the Eildon Hills rising in the distance. Around him were the traces of old Border conflicts and ruined strongholds.

Though physically limited, he roamed as much as he could. And perhaps most importantly, his grandmother told him stories of raiders, ghosts and ancient feuds. And these tales, half history and half legend, lodged deep in his imagination. From a really young age, Scott showed real literary promise.

John:

*And still I thought that shattered tower
The mightiest work of human power;
And marvelled as the aged hind
With some strange tale bewitched my mind,
Of forayers, who, with headlong force,
Down from that strength had spurred their horse,
Their southern rapine to renew,
Far in the distant Cheviots blue,
And, home returning, filled the hall
With revel, wassail-rout, and brawl.
Methought that still, with trump and clang,
The gateway's broken arches rang;
Methought grim features, seamed with scars,
Glared through the window's rusted bars,
And ever, by the winter hearth,
Old tales I heard of woe or mirth,
Of lovers' slights, of ladies' charms,
Of witches' spells, of warriors' arms;*

Sarah:

Thank you. And so that's from *Marmion*.

John:

Marmion, Sir Watt Scott.

Sarah:

And is that specifically, was he writing about Smailholm Tower?

John:

Yeah.

Sarah:

That's brilliant, isn't it?

So from that young age when he first was here and then he was so inspired by all the tales that he heard here.

Chapter 5

07:18

Sarah:

Ballads were the oral news feed of their day. Passed from voice to voice long before they were written down. Songs like *Thomas the Rhymer*, *Tam Lin* and *The Douglas Tragedy*, full of fairies, prophecies and bloodshed.

You can hear Scott refer to them in *Marmion*:

*And ever, by the winter hearth,
Old tales I heard of woe or mirth,
Of lovers' slights, of ladies' charms,*

Of witches' spells, of warriors' arms

Scott feared they might vanish. Industrialisation was reshaping Scotland. The old ways were slipping away. So he collected verses scribbled on scraps of paper, edited them and preserved them.

In 1802, he published *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*. Tales once carried only by memory were now fixed in print. And this reformatting, of taking something in one format – oral – and putting it into another – written – is something that would happen again many years later. Here's Jill.

Jill:

I'm Jill van Millingen. I am the Regional Collections Manager at Smailholm Tower. It's my job to care for the collections that we have here on site and ensure that they are displayed for visitor enjoyment and also that they are protected for future generations.

So today we're in Smailholm Tower in the Scottish Borders, so not too far away from the town of Melrose. It's quite a remote spot though, as we can see from looking out the windows. There's not a lot round about. It's quite a wild spot. It's often referred to as quite a romantic spot. And it's the perfect setting, in my opinion, for the dolls that we're going to look at today.

Sarah:

The stronghold of Smailholm Tower now holds a different kind of treasure. There's something unexpected waiting inside the tower. Instead of stepping into rooms that might be filled with armour or weaponry, they are instead filled with dolls.

So these dolls were created by an artist called Anne Carrick?

Jill:

Yes. So Anne Carrick was born in 1919 in Edinburgh. She came from a very artistic family. Her father was the head of sculpture at Edinburgh School of Art and her grandmother was a dressmaker. So we can see in the costumes of the dolls that she was very influenced by her family. And she herself started making the costume figures at the age of 12. And she was very influenced by historical romantic novels. And she attended Edinburgh Art College,

where she studied painting and drawing. She went to London, where she started a career in the theatre as a scenic artist. And I think that really comes across in the way that the dolls are set out for people to see. They're almost like stills of a theatre scene.

Sarah:

Yeah, very much so, yeah.

Jill:

While she was in the theatre, her costume making was a bit more of a sideline, but she did attend costume making classes, and we can really see the skills that she picked up in the dolls.

In 1947, she moved to Melrose, and she continued to live in the Scottish Borders for the rest of her life.

Sarah:

I love how theatrical these are, actually, because the theatre of it does help to tell the story. So can I ask you when Anne started making these dolls and how they came to be in your collection?

Jill:

So Anne actually started making costume figures for exhibitions as early as 1963 when she exhibited at the Edinburgh International Festival. These particular dolls that we see in the tower were made to celebrate the 200th anniversary of Scott's birth. So that was the 200th anniversary was in 1971. And over the next 11 years she created four scenes from the life of Sir Walter Scott: six from his *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, and Smailholm was actually the place where he was inspired to write these ballads, and six scenes from the Scottish fairy folklore. So we can see there's a real kind of mixture that she's taken from Scott's life.

How she made the dolls, you can't see it obviously underneath, but there's a wireframe. She used clay for the head and moulded it, and then she padded out the body. And after that she created these very realistic looking costumes.

She's using the types of materials that real people would have worn. She's got velvet, she's got cotton, she's got leather for the shoes. And this attention to detail and layers of the clothes, for example, when we've examined these dolls for conservation purposes, their underwear is accurate as well, even though you can't see it.

Sarah:

No way!

Jill:

So the fact that she's made them so lifelike, it can give them quite an eerie quality to a lot of people, but I think it really illustrates her talent.

Sarah:

It really does. The fact that she, like, the attention to detail and using all the actual materials that people would have worn and even the things you can't see, she even did those.

Jill:

Yeah, she's given that attention to detail.

Sarah:

I can see how it's eerie as well, because all this, like, ballad folklore and myths and legends and, you know, there's fairies and all sorts going on. It's like the dolls look really, like, sort of quite like they could come to life.

Jill:

They do. And when you're here on your own, dark winter's afternoon, they do feel quite lifelike.

Sarah:

Yeah, it's incredible. They're quite magical, actually. I love seeing them so close up.

Jill:

They came into the Hess collection in 1983. They were presented by the Saltire Society to the Secretary of State for Scotland. This was Anne's wishes. And she was actually present during the installation. She was very active in how the dolls were going to be presented in the tower. And we luckily have an extract from her diary, which her son was very kind enough to show us a few years back. And the day that they were installed here was a particularly exciting day for Anne because she also had a grandson born that day.

Sarah:

Oh, on the same day!

Jill:

Yes, so it's recorded in the diary that her grandson Alex and the Smailholm exhibition happened on the same day. So I always think that's very nice.

Sarah:

That's really lovely. She had such big events on the same day.

Jill:

Scott spent quite a lot of his childhood near Smailholm Tower. He spent many years with his grandparents and his aunt Jenny at Sandyknowe Farmhouse, which we can still see when we look out the window. And while he was here, his family entertained young Scott with stories of the Borders, supernatural folklore and also stories about the lawless Border Reivers, who'd plundered the land in centuries past.

Many of his ballads centre around the Reivers and their way of life, in consequence. *Reiver* is a Scots word for raider. It just means somebody who plundered and stole. And from the

13th to the 17th century, families in the Borders found that they had to take on this way of life in order to survive. It was a time where there was a lot of warfare between England and Scotland, and the land round about was just reduced to wasteland. They were unable to harvest their crops. And so, although it was a very brutal way to survive, they didn't really have any other choice.

Chapter 6

14:48

John:

Say you lived maybe 30 miles from me, but you had a bigger herd of cattle.

Sarah:

Right.

John:

I would come and steal them.

Sarah:

Right. The Reivers, that's what they would do.

John:

Yeah.

Sarah:

They would come round and steal.

John:

It wasn't just cattle. It could be livestock of any... It could be people.

It could be furnishings. They would take it for their own properties.

Sarah:

Yeah.

John:

It was notorious, the Border Reivers. They just never had a law. They were lawless in that respect.

Sarah:

And would those sorts of tales of the Border Reivers have inspired Scott's work as well?

John:

Oh yeah.

Jill:

And Scott has taken these stories, and some of them are the true stories of the real reivers and their lives, and then Anne has depicted them in her figures. So if we have a look at the figure here that is known as 'The Lament of the Border Widow'. So we have the Border Widow in her red woollen dress and you can see over her back she's carrying what's clearly a human figure, kind of shrouded. This is telling us about the human cost of this way of life. She's grieving for the loss of her reiver husband, who was said in the ballad to have been executed on the orders of James V of Scotland, and she's basically carrying his body home, which is obviously very sad.

John:

James V detested the Border Reivers. So he, probably the biggest number one clan in the Borders all the years ago was the Armstrongs.

Now, in the town of Langholm, there was a converted church, had the biggest collection of Armstrong memorabilia. That's now closed, but if you travel towards Gretna, there's Gilnockie Tower or something like that. That's their place. Now, James V hated the Border Reivers, so he summoned Armstrong to meet him. James V had a big army, and of course, Armstrong, oh, I'm going to meet the king, you dress accordingly. So Armstrong took his clan there. James V took umbrage and hung them all on the spot.

Sarah:

Oh no!

John:

Yes.

Sarah:

Just like that?

John:

Mm-hm.

Sarah:

Oh, God, that's horrific.

John:

It is.

Jill:

We have another example of the consequences of reiving in the Ballad of Johnny Armstrong. So this depicts Johnny Armstrong of Gilnockie, who was one of the leading 16th-century reivers. He was causing a lot of problems for James V of Scotland, and the king needed to find a way to pacify the unruly borderlands. So in the ballad, the king tricks Johnny into meeting him, where he's then hung along with the rest of his fellow reivers. And what we've got here is Johnny kneeling in front of the king to beg him for mercy, but the king says, no, you're a traitor, and he is executed.

Sarah:

Do you know, you can really see that as well in the way that she staged it, just with the slight hand movements, and then even the look in his eyes.

Jill:

Yes, they're very expressive faces.

Sarah:

Yeah, he's like really tormented and the king's looking quite sort of severe. But the detail in even the king's clothing is just incredible in his hat.

John was telling us that story earlier, so that was one of the ballads that then Scott has written down.

Jill:

Yes.

Sarah:

And then it's depicted, it's brought to life really. And installed.

Jill:

Yes, so Scott's hearing the ballads from his family, also from older generations of his friends, who are kind of passing on these stories in the oral tradition. And then Scott writes them all down for almost the first time.

Sarah:

Isn't that amazing? I mean, to write them down for the first time, that's almost as well...

That's quite a lot of responsibility to be doing that, you know, to take that on and think, I'm going to write it down. And there's probably a lot of different versions that exist orally.

Jill:

Yes, and he's sort of choosing, I guess, one of the narratives and putting it down.

Sarah:

And do you know, did Anne always have quite a feel for Walter Scott and his work? Was she always quite influenced by him?

Jill:

She's clearly very interested in Scottish history, and her figures are depicting Scottish history, but quite a wide range of periods and different stories in terms of what they depict.

So we have another infamous 16th-century reiver across here. This is known as the Ballad of Kinmont Willie. So this is William Armstrong of Kinmont. He led raids across the border, sometimes commanding over 300 men. He was very unpopular south of the border, consequently, and the English army was very keen to capture him and put an end to his raiding. This finally happened in March 1596, and they took Willie as a prisoner to Carlisle Castle.

So what we can see here is Willie's friends rescuing him. And the reason they did this is because he was actually captured on a day of truce, so he wasn't meant to have been taken. So his friends include Bold Buccleuch, who was Scott of Buccleuch, a Scottish warden and a close friend of Kinmont Willie's. And he led a group of men to Carlisle Castle under nightfall,

and they helped him escape from his prison. So in the Ballad of Kinmont Willie, we have the following:

*Then shoulder high, with shout and cry,
We bore him down the ladder lang;
At every stride Red Rowan made,
I wot the Kinmont's airms playd clang!*

So you can see we've got here Bold Buccleuch in his warder uniform. We've got Kinmont Willie here in his shackles and then his two other friends helping him down the ladder from Carlisle Castle.

Sarah:

It's amazing. So obviously the ballads are from oral history, which then Scott has then taken down. So he's transformed the oral into the written, and then because of the written, then Anne's transformed the written into the, what would you call it? 3D?

Jill:

Visual.

Sarah:

Visual. Thank you. You think it's amazing, all those different art forms.

Jill:

Because I suppose the end of a flat illustration, you've got the 3D figures.

Sarah:

Yeah, and there's something really special about that, actually. I don't think I've seen many places where you see doll 3D models by such incredible artists and also I just don't think you see that very often in places, do you?

I quite like it. It gets your childhood imagination going a little bit because it reminds me of those little theatres that you would have and you could make little figures so it's sort of ... I

think the little child in me wants to play with them and make them do things. I'm not going to do that, they're behind a glass case.

Oh wow! I like her.

Jill:

This is my favourite one.

Sarah:

Yeah, she's like Titania or something.

Jill:

Yes, a fairy queen.

Sarah:

Fairy queen. Which one are we? So we've gone up a level into the next.

Chapter 7

22:06

Jill:

Yes, so we're now in, this area of the tower depicts the supernatural stories. And this is all about the fairy realm, which Scott had a huge interest in.

Sarah:

I do too. It's quite exciting.

And you can see how this landscape, obviously it's got a history of ballads and tales, but you can see how all sorts of mysteries could come to the imagination here as well.

Jill:

Yes, so we're here on a day where the mist's swirling about. It's like, you know, the fairies are going to appear at the bushes.

So along with actual historical events, Scott also wrote at length about the supernatural. And in a lot of his ballads, he emphasises the powerful, malevolent fairy queen, who we can see over here, Anne has depicted. She is important enough in the ballads that Anne's actually made a standalone figure of her. She's the only one in this display.

Sarah:

Ah, because all the others have got someone else with them, but she's got her own one.

Jill:

Yes, and Anne's attention to detail, I think, really brings the character to life. She has this kind of greenish tinge to her skin. She is barefoot, but she's got this spectacular sort of black gauze glittery dress. And her belt... you can see she's wearing this kind of golden green belt that looks almost like a little bit snake-like.

Sarah:

Yeah, it does.

Jill:

And then her headdress, which to me is reminiscent of Disney's Maleficent, the evil fairy from *Sleeping Beauty*. And the way she's posed her as well; she's just stepped out from the undergrowth. She's almost beckoning the viewer to come back with her into the fairy realm.

Sarah:

She is. Because when you first revealed her, it did feel like Titania from Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Jill:

Yes, the same character, just known by different names.

Sarah:

It's incredible, and she's sort of peering from that plant, from the undergrowth. She is beautiful and so striking. As soon as you showed her to us, then it was a bit of a gasp.

Jill:

So she appears in quite a few of Scott's supernatural ballads, and so Anne has depicted her. She's over here again, although she has taken a slightly more human form. She looks like a beautiful lady on a white horse.

Sarah:

Which is this one?

Jill:

So this is the ballad of *Thomas the Rhymer*.

John:

In Melrose, just off the bypass, is a road that is known locally as the Bogle Burn. That's where, allegedly, Thomas the Rhymer met the Queen of Fairies.

Jill:

So Thomas was actually a real person. He was known as Sir Thomas of Ercildoun, and he was a 13th century laird, and he was sometimes referred to as true Thomas, apparently due to his inability to lie. And apparently in the 13th century, he met the Fairy Queen near the Eildon tree, which is a spot on the Eildon Hills near Melrose. The tree no longer exists, but

there is a commemorative stone known as Rhymer's Stone, which is still there today. And this is meant to depict the place where Thomas the Rhymer was taken into fairyland by the Fairy Queen.

John:

Now, when they were making a new stone under what was the Bogle road, they got permission from Anne to take that figure and Anne went with them to get her photograph taken where the new stone was done years ago. That's where Thomas the Rhymer, Thomas of Ercildoun, which is in Earlstoun.

Jill:

So he lived there for seven years and while he was there he is forbidden from speaking and told that if he does, he will never be able to return into the mortal realm again. Once the seven years have passed, Thomas returns to the Borders. He's allowed to go home and he now has the power of prophecy, so he sort of picked up a bit of the fairy magic himself from living with them.

Sarah:

Oh wow. Oh I love that story and that like that he's a person, that real person existed. He said this is what happened to him and then power of prophecy... that's amazing. And there he is with the fairy queen on her white horse.

Jill:

Another ballad where again we have the fairies is the young Tam Lin. So we have the young Tam Lin who is nine years old. He goes hunting with his uncle in the woods and there the fairy queen captures him and takes him back to the fairy realm, again for seven years. Seven crops up in many magical tales. It's a very powerful number. And what happens every Halloween is the fairy queen offers somebody as a tribute to the devil. So poor Tam Lin believes he's going to be the next sacrifice. Luckily for him, he meets and he falls in love with a young mortal girl called Janet, who we can see here. So Janet comes from Selkirk and she vows to help Tam Lin escape the fairy queen. And the scene that we've got depicted here by

Anne shows Janet intercepting the march of the fairies. She pulls Tam Lin from his white horse and she shields him with her green cloak so the fairies can't see him.

And what Anne's done here, which I found really interesting, is she's made the fairy horses and the fairies very kind of ethereal looking. They're all made of this kind of gauze and wire. And the only actual substantial figures in the scene are the mortals, Tam Lin and Janet, who is rescuing him. So it was a successful rescue and he went back into the mortal world with her and lived happily ever after.

Sarah:

That's brilliant. You know what these are so good at? Just hearing you talk about that story and actually seeing it as well. It makes you want to go off and read the story or learn more about the story as well. It's so good at bringing it to life and painting some pictures and pulling you into it.

And I love what you said there about they're... I hadn't noticed that until you said it, about they're all very ethereal, but they're proper block figures. That's a clever way of interpreting it.

Jill:

Yeah, to show the difference between the fairy realm and the real realm.

Sarah:

It's good that Janet came along. What would he have done without Janet?

And then she's also got this wood. Is that real wood?

Jill:

It is, yes. So she's got a real piece of tree to put in as part of the scene, which I think kind of helps bring it to life, sort of relate it to the landscape that we can see round about.

Chapter 8

28:21

Sarah:

Jill, it's quite a unique location, because obviously we're in Smailholm Tower, which is in the middle of this beautiful, amazing rolling landscape, quite remote, really, and also in a stone tower structure. So I imagine there must be quite particular challenges to that, and for looking after these beautiful, delicate, quite fragile I imagine, to some extent, because of the material, beautiful dolls and objects. How do you care for those and preserve them for the future, given the location we're in?

Jill:

So they are quite complex to care for given the environment and the fact they're composite objects, so we're dealing with several different types of materials in the same object. We've got the metal wire, which is obviously going to be at risk from corrosion. We've got textiles, which could get mouldy if they go damp. We've got the clay of the heads, which will swell and contract with heat and dampness. So we want to prevent that. So all of these materials are very sensitive to a high humidity environment. And in order to preserve them, we've had quite a lot of work done within the tower to create a stable environment.

So, as you can see, the dolls themselves are within cases. Each case has a little compartment underneath in which we put silica gel in and that helps to keep the case dry.

Sarah:

Okay, so it sucks in the moisture.

Jill:

Yeah, it sucks in the moisture. It's changed twice a year just to kind of keep on top of that. And then within the actual building, we had conservation heating installed. And so that works on a humidity setting. So when the humidity rises too much, the heating comes on, that dries out the environment. And then the heating goes off again as soon as it reaches an equilibrium. And it keeps an environment in which the humidity and the temperature is very stable. And that helps preserve the dolls.

We also do quite a lot of kind of visual observation of this collection. It's cleaned and condition-checked twice a year.

Sarah:

So you go inside and clean the dolls themselves and check the condition?

Jill:

Yes, so we remove the case lids and using soft brushes and conservation vacuums, we'll gently brush over the case, inside the case, and the dolls where necessary. And we'll also just do a visual observation and photography to ensure that there's been no changes in the colours of the textiles, in the clay faces. And we'll just check that there's no risk of pest damage from moth or other insects whose larvae could eat the textiles. So that's why, again, we want to actually look inside the case and make sure there's nothing there.

In terms of light damage, again, this collection is quite prone to that because of the textiles. So what we've had is we have solar film on all the glass in the windows, and that eliminates the UV light and it also reduces the lux levels, which is what causes fading. It causes the textiles to become quite brittle and eventually they would disintegrate over time. But by preventing that, we can ensure that this collection lasts for future generations.

Sarah:

There are so many layers to it. Sometimes as a visitor, you come in and you go, oh, they're in a glass case, so I can't touch them. Right? It's like you sort of think about it just on that one level. And then when you're saying about all the different, the special glass, the silicon, the special heating, I think all of the attention to detail that's gone in to making sure that these are really well looked after and preserved for the future. It's just brilliant.

Jill:

It is quite an extreme environment to look after this collection. You wouldn't probably by choice put textiles and metal into this old tower, but because they're here, because this is the environment that they're meant to be in, it's all about Scott's influence from this area and

him writing the ballads, it's the perfect place for them to be. So we just try to kind of manage that environment and ensure that they are protected.

Chapter 9

32:40

Sarah:

You may remember at the start of the episode, I said that Smailholm, for some reason, feels magical and otherworldly. It doesn't look it, but there's a lot happening here. The preservation of oral stories by pen and fabric, the craftsmanship of all that involves. The scale – small figures placed within the massive interior of a centuries-old tower. It all creates a strange doubling of history. A fortified home once built by the Pringles, later inspiring Scott's imagination and now reimaged again through Carrick's art. It feels intimate and vast all at once. And in a way, are we not all doing what Scott did? Taking fragments of history and legend and giving them form, preserving them, interpreting them, and with the help of people like you, passing them on.

This has been the Historic Scotland podcast.

It was produced and edited by Adam Stoner. I'm Sarah MacGillivray.

Next time, we're heading to Dumfries and Galloway to a unique 13th-century stronghold on the edge of a modern nature reserve. We're finding out about Caerlaverock Castle and how this small triangular fortress draws inspiration from the most interesting of places. See you then.

Chapter 10

34:17

Adam:

Hi, my name's Adam. I'm the producer of the Historic Scotland podcast. Sarah. Smailholm Tower. What were your first impressions?

Sarah:

It was such a unique setting. Being in the middle of these rolling hills, I really did feel like I was in a different world. And you can see how it fired up the imagination of a young Scot. I think it would do it to anyone, especially probably children, but all of us as well. It really fires off that imagination.

Amazing views all around and you feel like you're in a different world. So it was incredible and the sun shining that day, even though it was cold because it was all ice and snow because we recorded in January. It was stunning with the sun out so, yeah, absolutely loved it and I thought I probably could have sat there and like written something. I don't know what, but maybe if I'd had a bit more time, I could have sat and written. It was really inspiring.

You can imagine doing a beautiful walk around that countryside as well.

I loved the dolls more than I thought I would because you sometimes get this feeling that, you know, sometimes you think of dolls and you think they're going to be a bit creepy, but these ones, I found them incredibly theatrical so, with like a bit of theatre background on the go, they really spoke to me. I thought they were so, they were just so theatrical. It was like it was on stage, like a play was being performed by these dolls in these cases. And the attention to detail was breathtaking. And how alive these dolls felt, and all the movements just felt so charged and alive. So it was really beautiful to see them and how they really were bringing the stories to life in a different way. So that was really exciting.

How did you feel about Smailholm Tower? What was your take on it? Is it what you expected?

Adam:

Yeah, I mean, it's absolutely gorgeous, isn't it? You are driving and then all of a sudden you go down this dirt lane, and it's sort of tucked behind a farm because of the way that it's positioned. You don't really see it properly until kind of the last moment as you sort of pull into the car park that they've got there. I mean, it's beautiful. It is. It is such an amazing place.

Sarah:

Did you dress appropriately for the January snowy day, Adam? And we need the truth here.

Adam:

I did. I was wearing a ski jacket this time. When we recorded... the reason Sarah brings that up – thanks, Sarah – is that when we recorded the Holyrood episode, which is episode two in the series, I flew from London Heathrow to Edinburgh. And when I was at the airport, I suddenly realised that all I was dressed in was a T-shirt and we were going to be recording in the middle of December, which is why, yeah. Thanks, Sarah, for outing me that way.

So as we've said, obviously the place and the dolls are fascinating. For me, I'm quite into insects. And there was a funny moment as Jill was removing the covers of the dolls where these little lacewing flies sort of appeared. And there was a bit of a moment that we all shared where we thought, 'oh my God, there are like bugs in this museum grade cabinet'. But it turns out that it wasn't much of a problem. Listen to this.

Sarah:

So there's these little lacewings. Is that what you called them?

Jill:

Yes, so we have, yeah, the tower is not, you know, doors open so that people can come in and out and look at the view. We have insects kind of buzzing in and out, which we keep a control of. But this particular one that we're looking at, with the kind of lovely see-through wings, is a lacewing fly. So that's not a museum pest. We don't need to worry about lacewing flies. In fact, they eat moth egg larvae, so they will actually help us.

Sarah:

That's brilliant. So they're a friend of the collection. And they're very pretty as well. They sort of look like fairy moths. So they fit in with the supernatural.

They're the friends of the museum and they're sort of these little moths that look like ghosts. So that was really lovely to learn about. It was like they were wearing a fancy shimmering dress. So look out for them and know that they are the museum's friends. I like that.