

Historic Scotland podcast:

Series 2, Episode 3 transcript

Chapter 1

Sarah's intro:

Hello and welcome to the Historic Scotland podcast. My name is 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 off to Urquhart Castle. We're chatting to Josh Graham who takes care of tours at the castle.

Chapter 2

00:35

Sarah:

What a view that is, right? It must be nice coming to work every day.

Josh:

It is, it's lovely but it's nice to just come out for a few minutes and sort of take it all back in.

Sarah:

We're also off to the Loch Ness Centre in neighbouring Drumnadrochit to talk about one very infamous creature.

Charlie:

At some point there must have been something that raised eyebrows. There's got to be something that causes all this speculation.

Chapter 3

00:57

Sarah:

Let's play a game. When you search 'Scotland', what do you think appears? If you said 'Edinburgh Castle', you get a point. Well done. If you said 'pictures of Highland cows', you get another. Arthur's Seat? Sure. Bagpipes? Of course. But do you want to know what appears first? I tried this. Genuinely. It's a picture of Urquhart Castle, positioned right on the banks of one of the world's most famous bodies of water – Loch Ness. Here's Joshua.

Josh:

Most people just call me Josh.

Sarah:

He takes care of engagement at Urquhart Castle, overseeing the talks and tours, so he's the perfect person to show us around.

Josh:

Geographically, we're just on the banks of Loch Ness, at Urquhart Castle, so what we can see now is the glens and the loch, heading east, well northeast, towards Inverness.

Sarah:

So, I was reading a bit about it. So there's been, am I right in thinking, there's some sort of fortification here since Pictish times?

Josh:

There has been. So when we're looking at the castle from our position, we can look to the left and we'll see the tower, the Grant Tower, and if we look to the right, we'll see the citadel. And up that hill there, on the right side of the castle, is where the Pictish fort was found. So it's difficult to pinpoint exactly, but with that in conjunction with St Columba's diaries – he said he visited here and went to the Picts – so that would have been up in that area there, sort of around 500 AD time-ish. So there's been something here for a long time.

Sarah:

And is that because of where it's situated? Is that because of the geography?

Josh:

Yeah primarily. So with the Picts, it's maybe more difficult to say. It was possibly just because it was quite a natural defensible position, where it was on top of a steep hill, with access to the loch for food and transport. As time went by, it became way more of a more viable position just because of Loch Ness so if you head northeast, you'll eventually get to Loch Ness, and if you head southwest, you get to Fort William. So it's like the natural highway of the Highlands. It spans about 21 miles and, in a period where you don't have any well-maintained roads, you might have had a few sort of not poorly designed ones, but without a proper road it was by far... lochs were by far the fastest method of transport up and down the place.

Sarah:

So you'd be on your boat going up and down the lake, rather than in your car going up there.

Josh:

I don't know if they'd be able to match 60 miles an hour, but they would definitely be going faster than you could on land so, yeah, comparing it to the roads is the best way of looking at it.

Sarah:

That's incredible actually. I never thought about that, how busy it would have been, well not busy, but just like, that was the easiest way to get along that stretch.

Josh:

Yeah, I mean, it would have been busy-ish and you definitely would have been able to see anybody going up and down, which is also quite a fundamental reason for building it, living here as well. With the loch itself, you can get food from there as well. Fresh water fish, you can get salt water if you go to the seas on either side. So you've got really good access to food, really good travel and, yeah, you can monitor the lochs. If anyone's on it that shouldn't be there, you can sort of intervene there.

Eventually the castle became part of the royal family's assets. So, as a royal stronghold, it had that significance of saying that we're here in the north. And so anybody that was travelling up and down would have had that in the back of their mind, saying that, you know, the royal powers are here. And so don't do anything sort of dodgy.

Chapter 4

04:25

Sarah:

The loch is long, it's deep and it's dark. Urquhart Castle sits partway along the Great Glen Fault, a geological scar that splits Scotland almost perfectly in two. And as Josh was saying, this natural route made the site vital for centuries. You've got this natural corridor running coast to coast, so whoever controlled Urquhart held incredible power through the Highlands. And this is true throughout time. The castles are ruined today, but the earliest signs of defence here date back over a thousand years.

Josh:

The Picts themselves didn't write anything down. They drew symbols, but nothing that could be properly recorded as a written word. And so we don't have any records up until the late 1200s. So, to put you in the picture, Scotland's sort of a similar with its ... the way the map

looks. There's some disputes down south and some issues with the islands so they're not fully into the map yet, but basically the north was in sort of open rebellion and it was the MacHeths and the MacWilliams that were rebelling at the time, and obviously that's really not good for the Scottish king, who was Alexander II. And so he wanted to re-establish his power in the north and so they decided to build a castle that would signify their power and to squash the rebellions that were nearby.

So initially Alexander sent his son-in-law Alan Durward with his dad, Thomas, to come up and put down the rebellions, which they did with relative ease because they had quite a large force. But the king realised that if they went back to the central belt without leaving anything here in its place that the castle or that the north would break out into rebellion pretty soon after that. So he instructed Alan to stay here, build the castle and oversee the north in the royal power name. So they built the castle. They made the big ditch initially – there wouldn't have been a tower there. The tower would have been on top of the hill there, where the Pictish fort was, so there'd be a small tower with two kind of walls coming around to sort of signify that castle structure, if that makes sense.

Sarah:

Yes, it does, yeah.

Josh:

So Alan came here and he stayed here for the next sort of 50 years, until he died. So Alan and his wife, they had three daughters. They all had partners and they lived down south, so none of their partners were keen to come and take possession. So the castle itself reverted back to the Crown and eventually to Alexander III.

At that time, we're coming up to the Scottish Wars of Independence. So Alexander III, he eventually dies and Scotland has that succession crisis where they don't know who to choose as the next monarch. And that's primarily because he didn't have any living descendants left. He had a granddaughter that they tried to bring across from Norway, but she didn't make it on the voyage, and she died. And so, as I was saying, Scotland had a succession crisis and had to decide on a new monarch.

They elected to get some outside help. So they asked their neighbouring country for assistance and the neighbouring country at the time, England, and neighbouring monarch at the time, Edward, who was nicknamed the Hammer of the Scots for a reason. So he came

up, helped them choose a monarch. They chose John Balliol, and he did relatively a good job for a little while until Edward's true plan came into place and he invaded.

Chapter 5

07:51

Sarah:

Edward invades and there's chaos everywhere. The Highlands are suddenly swept into this conflict and Urquhart Castle, perched on the banks of Loch Ness, was right in the thick of it. The castle changes hands multiple times as the English pushed north and the Scottish lords resisted fiercely. Soldiers garrisoned the castle, walls were reinforced and the loch itself became both a barrier and, as we know, a highway.

The wars culminated at Stirling Castle. And I have some news for you, because there's an episode all about Stirling Castle waiting for you right now. It's available exclusively to Historic Scotland members who also have access to extended episodes with exclusive behind-the-scenes content too.

Historic Scotland membership also gives you free entry to sites across the country and helps support the care and conservation of the places we explore. It's a really great episode.

There's some info in the show notes.

OK, right, where were we? Ah, yes, Edward invades. Chaos. It culminates at Stirling Castle and the Battle of Bannockburn. Here's how the story of Urquhart continues.

Josh:

So after the initial first stage of the Scottish Wars of Independence, when Edward's army's defeated at Bannockburn in 1314, the castle and its lands ... the last people to hold it were supporters of the English. So they were obviously removed from the castle's ownership and it fell back to Robert the Bruce, but they were kind of too concerned with the Central Belt to deal with anything going on up here. And so it fell to the duty of constables to look after the castle until the next notable family were given it.

It's difficult to say who got the castle next entirely, as there's not really many records, kind of like before the Wars of Independence started. What we do know, comes a little bit later, that raids again sort of take place in the Highlands. And this time it's by the island lords, the

MacDonalds. And they come into the north basically to sort of plunder. And their ancestors were Norse and Viking, and so they sort of take up that way of living again. They come into Scotland and they sort of take the more valuable bits where they can.

Eventually, they end up at the Glen Urquhart area. And the castle is quite a juicy place to come and raid. They've got lots of valuables here. So there's a little bit of back and forth between the Scottish Crown and the MacDonalds. At the end of the 1300s, the MacDonalds take place quite a big raid. They gain access to the castle and the stuff that's here, and they take possession of it for roughly 15 years, and that kind of goes back and forth.

In 1509, the castle is given to the Grant family, and they're given the castle for the same reasons that Alan Durward came down here and that was to help put down rebellion and to regain a bit of control in the north. So the Grants do quite a good job. There was parts of the castle that had fallen into disrepair. They repair it, they repair the tower that was there and they transform it into the Grant Tower, on the left-hand side if you're looking at it from our point of view.

Sarah:

Quite a famous part of it, isn't it?

Josh:

A famous part. So they build that Grant Tower and in 1545 the MacDonalds come back and it's a time in history where it's known as the Great Raid because the MacDonalds come here, the Grants unfortunately aren't actually here at the time – they're up at their estates in Grantown-on-Spey and they leave a token force of around 50 men-at-arms. So they're here, they see the MacDonalds with their much larger forces – it's difficult to sort of imagine what there were – but there was a vast amount more than what they had defending the castle. They take one look and think 'that's not for us; we don't want to die today' and so they leave, they open the doors and they let the MacDonalds come in. And they take everything from livestock to a small chest full of money to anything else that's valuable in the castle. It's even written in the royal financial part for the time that they even took the doors and gates because they had some valuable stuff on them. So the MacDonalds kind of do what they want with the castle and the Grants have conveniently left them three large ships, which they take, load up and hightail it back to the islands.

Sarah:

Really?

Josh:

Yeah.

Sarah:

That is a big raiding. And then back in the boat and off we go.

Josh:

I know.

Sarah:

And then the castle's...

Josh:

The castle's here. The Grants and the government rebuild it. The Grants do actually seek legal awards and the courts give it to them, but there wasn't anyone to go and collect it. So the MacDonalds owed the Grants this money, but there's no one to get it. But what does actually happen is they do start to rebuild parts of the castle to what it was before the MacDonalds came and ruined it. The Grants themselves... a branch of the Grant family lives here way up until the middle of the 1600s. They eventually leave and go and build quite a nice stately home in Drumnadrochit, which is still there to this day, if you're ever in the area. So the Grants have moved out of the castle. They still legally own it, but they're not living here.

Chapter 6

13:16

Sarah:

The next big moment in Urquhart's story comes in the late 1600s. At the time, King James VII of Scotland, also James II of England, is on the throne. He's a Catholic, and in a country where the Protestant church is very much in power, that's problematic. People aren't happy with his religion and tensions are running high. To make a long story short, James already has two daughters, both Protestants, married to Protestants, so everyone assumes that when he dies, the throne will pass smoothly to them and Protestant rule would continue.

But then, James has a son with his second wife, and suddenly the idea of a Catholic king ruling the United Kingdom again becomes a real possibility. The Protestant establishment? Not having it. This is the Glorious Revolution. James is deposed, his daughter and her husband are appointed monarchs instead.

James is furious. He's also not having it. He wants his kingdom back. And that's when things start spilling north. James makes his way into Scotland, trying to rally support. And it's here, in the Highlands and around Urquhart, that the drama really unfolds. For those living near Urquhart, it must have felt like the whole world had tipped over. Even today the castle walls are scarred by centuries of conflict.

Josh:

So it's James and his supporters, which were called the Jacobites and that's just because Jacobus is Latin for James.

Sarah:

Okay, that's where Jacobites comes from.

Josh:

Yeah, that's right. So him and his supporters, they come round to the north and they look at Urquhart Castle to take it. It's said that they tried a few times but there's nothing documented to say it. And they said that they tried a couple of times and were unsuccessful, so the Jacobites moved on. Not James himself, but his followers would have tried to come into the castle. And so once they realised it wasn't going to work they went sort of northeast. The people of Urquhart Castle... it still belonged to the Grants and the Grants allowed the government to have troops here to defend the location. And so when the troops saw the

Jacobites leave, they were ordered to go and sort of head towards that area, northeast area, to meet them. But the castle itself would be a problem if they'd left it.

Sarah:

Okay.

Josh:

So to stop the Jacobites from gaining the castle or gaining entry to use it, they decided to sort of use a scorched earth technique, where they blew up the gatehouse and some of the defending walls so that no one could use the castle as a military stronghold. When I say no one, they specifically did that for the Jacobites, so they didn't have access to it to use it. Probably because it would be a good base camp for them. Again, if we were allowed to use a bit of common sense, as the castle's been a status of royal power through the ages, it would have also signified maybe his right to rule and so they didn't want that in any of the ways, so they just blew it up and made sure that no one could use it as a military stronghold again.

Chapter 7

16:23

Sarah:

After the Jacobite Rebellion, Urquhart Castle was badly damaged. The Grants and the Royal Forces had done their part and the castle just started to fall apart.

By 1715, a storm hit and part of the Grant Tower collapsed. You can still see the slope where it gave way. The Grants still owned it, but they weren't interested in rebuilding. Military architecture was changing and the old walls just didn't fit the new style of fortifications designed to withstand cannon fire. So they let it go.

Slowly, over decades, the castle became a ruin. And that's when something interesting happens. As Urquhart slips from fortress to ruin, Loch Ness acts as a passive witness. By the time visitors start arriving again in the late 1700s and early 1800s, they're not just coming here for history, they're coming for the atmosphere.

This is the Romantic era, when people are drawn to wild places and half-forgotten stories, ruins are seen as beautiful, melancholy, poetic. And Urquhart, sitting right on the edge of this vast black loch, becomes part of a much bigger imagination. And speaking of imagination, we are on the edge of Loch Ness so shall we address the elephant in the room or maybe the monster in the loch?

Josh:

Don't talk to me about it.

Sarah:

That was quite funny.

Josh:

You can see him coming up...

Sarah:

I actually looked! We're all about the facts here at Historic Scotland. And you can't deny that one of the big draws of Loch Ness is the legend of the Loch Ness monster.

So you haven't seen Nessie?

Josh:

No, but I've seen a lot of Nessie hunters.

Sarah:

Do people actually come hunting?

Josh:

Yeah, there's annual sort of viewings and that, so...

Sarah:

Annual viewings?

Josh:

People across the loch sort of look for the monster. You've wangled your way into me talking about this.

Chapter 8

18:36

Sarah:

We're going to turn this history podcast into something of a detective one. Just for a little moment. When people think of Nessie, they usually picture blurry photographs in tourist boats. But the first Nessie wasn't a joke. It was a warning.

The earliest account of a creature in Loch Ness comes from the 6th century. It's a text called *The Life of St Columba*, written by a monk in 697 AD. Columba was an Irish missionary who travelled through the Highlands spreading Christianity. At the time, this landscape was already rich with folklore, spirits and rivers and creatures that marked the boundary between the human world and the wild. According to this text, Columba was travelling near the River Ness – it flows out of Loch Ness – when he encountered locals burying a man who'd been killed by a water beast. He vows to find it and vanquish it with the power of his religion.

Josh:

St Columba, in his writings, he tended to embellish a lot of his achievements, and maybe it wasn't him, but maybe his team, his writers.

Sarah:

So whoever was writing it down.

Josh:

They embellished a lot of things that happened, so any myths that came from his era were probably upscaled to make it exciting.

Sarah:

That was the voice of Josh. This is the voice of Charlie from the Loch Ness Centre in neighbouring Drumnadrochit.

Charlie:

The first claimed sighting was Columba's in 500 AD, who banished a water beast from the loch.

Sarah:

Myth? Misidentification? Mysterious creature? Which one?

Charlie:

The centre's based at the Old Drumnadrochit Hotel, where the manageress, Aldi Mackay, she was not the first ever sighting, but the one that's kind of started this snowball effect of bringing people to the area. So it was her and her husband, they were on their way into Inverness and she claims that she saw a water beast of some form, its head popping out the water. But by the time she got her husband, like elbowed him to have a look, it submerged against the water again. But it was her account of telling that to the community in Drum that's really, yeah, that's what made it widespread.

Sarah:

Moira's also from the centre.

Chapter 9

20:56

Moira:

The whole centre is very much born of all the activity and the research that was undertaken during the 70s, where Adrian Shine, he created the Loch Ness Project. He was one of the original people that came to the loch in the 70s, and he just never left. He's been here for 50 years, and he has spent his life amassing information. And we have so many artefacts and within this building we have artefacts that haven't seen the light of day for many, many years. And we now run the experience to let people come to Loch Ness to find in one place, this is the birthplace of the legend, this dates back to when Aldi Mackay in 1933 saw something, but she wasn't quite sure and actually I have been told she didn't want anybody to know about what she'd seen. She thought it was bad for tourism.

Sarah:

What is the impact on the village of, like, you know, one of the most famous lochs in the whole world? And I suppose it's this village in the Highlands.

Charlie:

Yeah, I mean, for maybe two thirds of the year, like, the footfall in it just rapidly increases. Summer, spring, even autumn, it can be busy. I think you just get flooded, these people wanting a proper Highland experience kind of thing. And yeah, there's so many places that offer different components of that in the village. So it's good to see. You drive down and you just see it as it's swarmed.

I think people are pleasantly surprised when they come here because I think sceptics are like, oh, it's all going to be Nessie-focused, everything's going to be the existence of that. But we take a wider scope perspective of kind of why what's been done is so important but like the impact it's had on the village like Drum and surrounding areas.

Chapter 10

22:58

Sarah intro:

Nessie is cryptozoological. That's a creature that may or may not exist. There are tons of eyewitnesses and yet no credible evidence that there might be something lurking in the loch. But the story crops up time and time again, in folklore, at the Drumnadrochit Hotel, in a now infamous photograph captured in 1933. Even today, people log their sightings online. The last was a few days ago.

From the 1960s, Nessie becomes a subject of scientific curiosity. Sonar sweeps, underwater cameras, expeditions, military-grade equipment to search a Scottish loch. It has led Loch Ness to be one of the most studied bodies of water in the world.

Sarah:

So was it always known that there was maybe a monster in the loch and then her sighting started to confirm that and started to grow?

Charlie:

Yeah, I think Nessie's always been known kind of thing, but that's really when the attraction to drag people here kind of started. And then from there it's just spiralled. You've got the Loch Ness project that started in the 80s. The government commissioned research that was done. And that was also based here. It's actually the gift shop now. It's just that was all the location.

Moira:

I do remember absolutely believing there was a Loch Ness monster. I had my nose pressed up against the window of the car as we drove down Loch Ness.

Charlie:

There must have been at some point something. But like, whether there is still now, I'm not too overly sure. It's got to be something that causes all this speculation.

Sarah:

And do people in the village, do they tend to believe in Nessie? Is there anyone who's like, do you know if there's anyone local who's like, yeah, absolutely, I've seen her?

Charlie:

I think there's a few locals who have their stories. I know our skipper, he's got his own, and he'll often be out and come back with photos. Nothing conclusive from anyone, but they do have their stories. Their own experiences of seeing something out on the loch, which I suppose is a bit inevitable of being around the surrounding area their whole life. So I suppose it's inevitable that they're going to have at least one experience where they thought they saw something a bit strange in the water.

Moir:

It's not the longest loch and it's not the deepest loch. The deepest loch is Loch Morar. The longest loch is Loch Awe, I think. It's the biggest loch by volume. It's got more water than all the lochs in England and Wales. So it's long and deep and dark and mysterious.

We have our very own Coastguard station. It's not usual to have a Coastguard station on an inland waterway. We obviously usually expect to see them on the sea, but because Loch Ness, it's just a haven for people to have their holidays. We've got the Caledonian Canal going from one end to the other. So people just pass through. People enjoy the waters, the canoe, but we do need to keep everybody safe because these big waves appear. And these are the waves that sometimes create ripples. And ripples cause shapes. And shapes can mean anything.

Charlie:

There's talk of something from the canal may be getting in and out into the loch, but I don't know what it could be that is the scale that people regard as... but, yeah, at some point there

must have been something's my thinking. Whether it's still there, I'm not too sure. I personally, like driving from Inverness here on the A82, I've never actually seen anything that's made me have a double look. Not yet anyway.

Sarah:

Not yet. Do you keep an eye out?

Charlie:

No, gotta watch out for the tourist drivers and the rentals.

Sarah:

Yeah, that's true. Concentrate on the road.

Charlie:

So no, not normally. But yeah, you hear people like, oh, there's like a ripple in the water and they double take. But no, not for me. I've never seen anything that's raised an eyebrow.

Chapter 11

27:13

Sarah:

So, what do you think? No, seriously. For most of human history, this landscape was dangerous. Then it became romantic. Then it became searchable. To medieval monks, Nessie proved the power of saints. To Victorians, she proved the wildness of the Highlands. What about you?

Charlie:

We kind of present like a balanced argument and then at the end we've got our debate room, which presents the guests with the opportunity to vote on what they think. So you've got the three options of: 'I see Nessie', 'I see nonsense', 'I see possibility', and the very last thing visitors can see is like the overall votes, the outcome of what everyone's voted. So I think we're at 46% possibility. The other vast chunk of it goes to 'I see Nessie'.

Moira:

We then translate that into, we've had a new sculpture made by a local company, so people are able to take a little bit of ribbon, coloured ribbon, and each ribbon represents whether they are a believer or a non-believer and then they tie that onto a sculpture that we have. So we've got quite a good visual representation of what people think and very much people are still believing in Nessie, which is great.

Chapter 12

28:36

Sarah:

When you search Scotland, Urquhart Castle appears. This image, this castle, this water – it's all come to represent Scotland to so many people around the world.

The stories are intertwined and it's not hard to see why Urquhart Castle and Loch Ness are inseparable. One is built to dominate the landscape, the other refuses to be dominated at all.

And as I leave, I find myself doing what people have done here for over a hundred years. I stop, I turn back, and I look out across Loch Ness, just in case something looks back.

This has been the Historic Scotland podcast.

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

Next time, how one small corner of Scotland changed the world forever. We're off to Kinneil House in Bo'ness. It played home to inventor James Watt and his creation, the steam engine. See you then.