

# Historic Scotland podcast: Episode 6 transcript

## Chapter 1

### **Sarah:**

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 will be travelling across Scotland to a different site, unearthing their surprising tales. Today, we're at Melrose Abbey.

It's a place of deep history, faith and legend, but one story stands out above the rest – it is said that Robert the Bruce's heart is buried here. But how did it get here and is it really true?

To answer those questions, we'll be speaking to Richard, who, in front of the world's media, opened the heart's casket.

## Chapter 2

0:54

### **Richard:**

And I'm standing there thinking, OK, the show's started. Which end should we chop off?

### **Sarah:**

And Fiona, who shines more light on Bruce and how part of him ended up here.

### **Fiona:**

He was aware that his immortal soul was perhaps not as shiny and clean as it could otherwise have been. And so going on crusade was one way of helping with purgatory, that intervening period, you know, before you decide where you're going.

## Chapter 3

01:24

### **Sarah's intro:**

Melrose Abbey is one of the most evocative sites in the country.

This magnificent ruin, nestled in the Scottish Borders, was founded in 1136 by King David I.

It became one of the wealthiest and most influential monasteries in medieval Scotland, a centre of devotion, learning and power.

Over centuries, it was home to generations of monks who prayed, farmed and worked within its grand cloisters.

Though much of the abbey now lies in ruin, its Gothic stonework remains stunning, with intricate carvings decorating its weathered facade, including a famous sculpture of a pig playing the bagpipes.

Historic Scotland's now retired Head of Collections, Richard Welander, stood with me on a rather dreich day to talk about the site and about the legend of the heart.

## Chapter 4

02:23

### **Richard:**

So here we are. Here's the entrance to the chapter house. And the excavation, roughly where we're standing now as we're looking eastwards, there's a large area of flat ground over there. And then beyond is a modern, or I say modern, a 19th-century house called Cloister House and the old Melrose Brewery, which is part of our works department, beyond.

### **Sarah:**

Oh, lovely.

**Richard:**

But this area was relatively, didn't really understand the detail relationship between the various structures. You can see bits of wall footings and things. And these curious asphalt boxes, box lids, they're covering areas of medieval tiles.

**Sarah:**

Oh, wow.

**Richard:**

But the excavations, there were excavations here in the 1920s, which is when the heart casket was originally found.

But the work done in 96 was really to try and get a clearer idea of the extent of the chapter house on that side. Because where we're standing, we're actually standing with the entrance. You can imagine a doorway here, and you can see the lovely column bases here.

A chapter house is basically a place where the monks would meet and discuss. The idea of a chapter, like Hell's Angel chapter or a chapter in a cathedral. It's a group of people who are meeting and discussing matters of the day, making decisions. It's the management board.

**Sarah:**

Okay, so that would have all happened in the chapter house. Amazing. And how many monks would have been here at that time?

**Richard:**

I don't know, to be honest with you. I mean, I suspect a reasonable number. I mean, the big buildings, we walked past them, but that's where the dormitories were. And a modern, a medieval monastery was really like a small village.

I mean, it had the lay monks and the clerical monks, and the lay monks were busily getting food in, doing the preparation of the food, looking after the place, doing the repair work, building, a lot of building work going on. All that sort of stuff was happening day in day out. It was a thrive... I mean, we're here on a wet, cold, very quiet day with two or three visitors

wandering around, but this would have been a thriving, bustling place and they would have been being called into the abbey on a regular basis through the day to attend services and through the night in fact as well.

We don't have it surviving very well here, but in some of the abbeys, you've got these night stairs, which take you up from the dormitory down directly into the church so that you can imagine these poor monks tottering down the hill from their beds, going in early morning to the services and then off onto a busy day.

**Sarah:**

Yeah, oh, fantastic. And what's the earliest date of a monastery being here or a building being here?

**Richard:**

Well, I think this was built in the early 1100s.

**Sarah:**

Okay.

**Richard:**

And a remarkable survival. You can see, it's better on the other side, but the... Well, in fact, on this side, you can see these little archways running along the wall beside the... on the wall of the church there.

Then above, you can see a series of rectangular slots. And above that, a series of square slots. That's where there would have been a projecting roof. So that's where the timbers supporting the roof would have been.

**Sarah:**

Okay, it would have come out...

**Richard:**

And then along here, at the edge of the garth, or edge of the cloister, this stone, it's covered in grass now, but there would have been a raised wall with archways in it.

So it's an enclosed space. All the way around here would have been enclosed.

**Sarah:**

Wow.

**Richard:**

And in the centre of the garth, in the centre here, would have been... there's a lovely, down the road at Jedburgh, there's a wonderful recreation of the herb garden.

**Sarah:**

Oh, lovely.

**Richard:**

Full of medicinal herbs and all that sort of thing.

**Sarah:**

So that would have been here as well?

**Richard:**

Yes, quite likely.

**Adam:**

Is it fair to say that Melrose is now basically famous for this?

**Sarah:**

That's the voice of Adam, our producer.

**Richard:**

That's a rotten thing to say. Yes, yeah.

When the heart was discovered, or rediscovered, I suppose to be accurate, in 1996, a friend and colleague, Gordon Ewart, who was the excavator of Kirkdale Archaeology, who was excavating here, was fizzing mad that the world's media and press were showing such interest in this artefact when he was showing us the wonders of the chapter house.

Melrose and Bruce suddenly became, in a matter of no time at all, world famous. And I think there's an interesting, in my mind, I mean, this was all happening in 96. Cast your mind back a year previously – Mel Gibson, *Braveheart*, all that, that came out in 95.

And I think the sort of worldwide enthusiasm for... I mean, when you speak to Fiona about Bruce, I mean, she will tell you in no uncertain terms, I'm sure, that *Braveheart* was full of massive inaccuracies, but it was a hugely popular and hugely successful film.

It certainly put Scotland, it certainly put Bruce, and indeed the following year, in 96, when this heart turned up, the whole story of... I mean, the wonderful romanticism of the story of the heart being thrown at them, you know, and all that stuff, and Fiona will fill in the gaps for that.

Yes, it became, Melrose became... yes, I think you probably could say world famous for a short period of time.

Certainly, I mean, the visitor numbers, I suspect, I don't know, but I suspect rocketed. And a lot of it was related to visitors wanting to come and see the marker.

Her Majesty the Queen came.

**Sarah:**

Really?

## **Richard:**

Eventually. It was on the Golden Jubilee tour. And she was interested enough to come and have a look. And, yeah, it really did capture the imagination.

I think that it was also, if you think about it, that last five years of the 20th century in Scottish political history terms was mega. Because, I mean, we had the devolution referendum.

And, yeah, I think it all just played into it in all sorts of fascinating ways. I mean, it was amazing.

The press interest in the decision to open the Twenties casket to see what was inside it. We did have a lot of discussion about whether we should do it, how we should do it, where we should do it. But when we did eventually do it and get the old hacksaw out and chop the top off to have a look inside, the press just went mad. It was extraordinary.

## **Chapter 5**

09:41

### **Sarah's intro:**

I hate to be a tease, but we're going to put Richard on pause for just a moment because, well, we can't exactly tell you the story of Bruce's heart being buried at Melrose Abbey without first learning about Bruce himself.

And the person to do that is Fiona Watson. She's an author and an historian, and she knows all about Bruce.

So we're going inside the museum here. It tells the story of the building itself, but also the surrounding area. And sitting down over a nice cuppa to find out more about one of Scotland's most famous kings. And I had a big question.

## **Chapter 6**

10:22

### **Sarah:**

So if you could just maybe start, Fiona, and tell us, like, who was Robert the Bruce?

**Fiona:**

Good question. That is a very good question. And it's not actually a straightforward answer.

Because the thing about Robert the Bruce is that, you know, there's a degree of inevitability about our thinking of him being king, but he actually wasn't really supposed to be king.

His family, when the Scottish King Alexander III had died prematurely, well, all his children had pre-deceased him. So there's an issue about who should be king.

And in the end, it was between two very ambitious men: John Balliol and our Robert Bruce's grandfather, also called Robert Bruce, Robert Bruce number five. And it was Balliol who won.

And when Edward I, who had managed to manoeuvre his... it's a very complicated issue, by saying that he was overlord of Scotland – we won't go into that detail – Edward came up to Scotland and kicked John Balliol off the throne because he thought he had the right to do that. And the Bruces were expecting, as they were the runners-up, that they would become kings of Scots.

But I think Edward I had had enough of kings of Scots, so he said, no, no, no, I'm just going to rule Scotland myself. This is in 1296.

So, from that point on, our Robert Bruce's father has the claim to the throne. But it's actually the young Robert, the youngest one, the future king, who actually tries... is very involved in Scottish politics when William Wallace and other people kickstart rebellion against Edward I's rule. Robert Bruce does join... the young Robert Bruce joins that and he even becomes a guardian technically in the name of King John, the absent king that Scots didn't think wasn't their king anymore. But really he's fomenting, he's trying to put forward his own ambitions to get his credentials to lead Scotland up by being part of that, because the Bruces had actually sided with Edward I in 1296.

**Sarah:**

Oh, they did?

**Fiona:**

Yes, they did. They were on the other side because they were anti-Balliol. So, he's trying to put himself forward as a leader of the political community, while John Balliol and his big

supporters – it is quite complicated – the Comyn family, an unfortunate name – C-O-M-Y-N – are the most important family in Scotland and they supported Balliol.

So they're all kind of out the country and so young Robert Bruce sees an opportunity to put himself forward as a leader. And he becomes a guardian, admittedly with John Comyn of Badenoch – it's a joint guardianship.

But in 1302, or the end of 1301, there's a possibility that John Balliol, who's now on the continent, Pope has demanded his release, that he might be coming home with the French army and that's too much for Robert Bruce. The actual possibility of Balliol being in Scotland is too much for him. So he sues for peace. He goes to Edward and says, will you take me back? Which Edward does.

**Sarah:**

So he keeps switching allegiance.

**Fiona:**

Well, he's always consistently pro-himself. He's very consistent. His own ambition.

So, to cut a very long story short, Edward takes over Scotland again. Robert the Bruce's father died, so he now has the claim to the throne.

And very quickly, well, he murders John Comyn, who would probably, once Edward I dies, have taken the throne of Scotland himself. Because he would have been the next.

So Bruce pre-empts that by killing him and then seizes the throne.

**Sarah:**

So when he then took the throne and became king of Scots, how long was then his reign?

**Fiona:**

Well, he reigned, extraordinarily, till 1329. So from 1306, when he died in 1329.

But maybe from 1309, he could start to say... he had his first parliament in 1309. He really wasn't strong enough to do that. There were a lot of Scots against him because of the

murder of John Comyn, the most important man. And a lot of people, it's easy to say, well, of course, they should have supported Bruce. He was a murderer. He'd usurped the throne. He made a lot of Scots' lives very difficult. What is the right thing to do?

But there's nothing like success to get people on side. Once he started to win, then I think people went, okay, we'll maybe give him a try.

**Sarah:**

So there was a moment after he'd murdered John Comyn that it was like this could go either way, this might not... Because how could you support a murderer?

**Fiona:**

Well, and also, you know, a murderer who's pants. You know, I mean, who's absolutely rubbish. I mean, that's the point.

He's not proved himself as a military leader, so why would you back him? But then, of course, who else would you back if you wanted an independent Scotland? So, there was a difficult time for Scotland. It worked out. We all know that now. We know that now looking back.

But for people at the time, he nearly broke Scotland by what he did, by splitting Scotland in two and actually making all those who'd fought for Scottish independence up to 1304, force them onto the side of the English.

**Sarah:**

For me, Bruce has always been this incredible symbol of Scottish strength. and independence.

**Fiona:**

No, he is. No, he totally is. Because he won. Because he succeeded. And, you know, at the end of the day he was what Scotland needed. But for certainly those early years, a lot of Scots would have wondered what on heaven's name were we supposed to do?

You know, what was going on? What was Bruce thinking? But, in 1308, the good thing, it was lucky for him, Edward I dies in 1307.

And now Edward II does continue to campaign against Bruce, but he needs to go and get his coronation sorted out, and he ends up... there's a lot of difficulty in England because so much money had been spent on Edward I wars, and Edward II wasn't as politically astute as his father. At all. That was an understatement.

So there's no English army in Scotland between 1307 and 1310, so that gives Bruce free rein to go after his Scottish enemies, the Comyn family, who are still around.

And he actually gets really ill. He's up in the northeast, really, really ill, supposedly dying. But then he manages, he rallies, and he is carried in front of the army in a litter. And the minute that the Comyns hear that Bruce is alive and coming, they scatter.

So already, even by 1308, he is starting to develop a reputation that kind of does a lot of the work for his armies. Oh my goodness, and that will certainly continue. They're so successful. Bruce and his generals are so successful, even in England. The English have no response. Bannockburn proves this but then the Scots raid deep into England to try and force England into making peace on Bruce's terms. Just word that the Scots are coming is enough to have people go 'okay, what do we need to do to get rid of them – pay them off or just run away?'

### **Sarah:**

So his reputation that he built up through all his successes and with his generals meant that already that reputation was doing quite a lot of work.

### **Fiona:**

Yeah, definitely. The English didn't know what to do with them. And that includes... he has many generals. There's his brother Edward. There is Thomas Randolph, who's his kind of nephew. And there's James Douglas, who's very important to the story of the heart.

James Douglas was a bit different from the others. He needed to get his family lands back because his father had crossed Edward I one too many times. It was kind of three strikes and he was definitely out. And he had lost all his family lands.

And James Douglas, his eldest son, was kind of, he was forced to go and be in the train of the Bishop of St Andrews. And he went to Paris and, you know, he wasn't really in Scotland. He was young.

And he didn't get his lands back when Edward I reconquered Scotland because that had all happened before the deal that he'd made with the Scots to submit in 1304.

So James Douglas needed to get his lands back, but he prevaricated – he wasn't sure whether he would go with Bruce or not. And just before Loudoun Hill, he actually made his choice and went to Bruce. And that was the right decision for him.

But again, we know that, but he didn't.

### **Sarah:**

Yeah, it's really interesting to think like that. They're taking a risk, educated sort of decision.

### **Fiona:**

So he made the right decision and he could then conquer, get back his family lands in Scotland anyway, Douglas, near Lanark. And then Douglas... there's a big epic poem about Robert the Bruce called 'The Brus' but it's just as much about Douglas. You might have heard that mentioned. It's just as much about Douglas. And John Barbour who writes this, about 50 years after the death of Bruce, he tries to big up Douglas, so we have to kind of unpick that. But it doesn't seem like he was a knight before Bannockburn, he was knighted just before Bannockburn.

And after that, you start to see Douglas becoming more and more important to Robert Bruce, particularly here in the south of Scotland, on the border between Scotland and England.

And really, Douglas is put in by Bruce to guard the border. Other people are doing other things. Thomas Randolph is up in the north. Edward Bruce is sent to Ireland after Bannockburn.

And Douglas is down here guarding this part and he gets a lot of lands in this area. So this is the heart of... well although Douglas itself is far to the west from here, this becomes his heartland and he is coordinating the Scottish effort directly against England's periods of truce. But he's doing all that and gaining a great reputation, to the point where it is said – I wasn't there so I don't know if this is absolutely true – but mothers in the north of England, because the Scots read it and James Douglas was at the head of this most of the time, they would say to their children if they wouldn't go to sleep, "shh, or the black Douglas will come and get you".

**Sarah:**

Really?

**Fiona:**

He was a real bogeyman for the northern English.

**Sarah:**

Wow. Such was his reputation.

**Fiona:**

Absolutely. Totally fearless, totally brutal, totally effective, all of those things. And he does seem to have been genuinely a good friend of Robert Bruce.

It's almost like a band of brothers, those who'd been there in the early days. They suffered, you know, and it was their own fault but they suffered. It's Bruce's fault but ... and so they were really, really close and there's evidence, this so-called Emerald Charter, I think of 1323, when Robert Bruce sort of reissues all in one document a charter to all the grants of land he's given Douglas because Bruce tended not to give lands away beyond his own family. So Douglas was kind of quite exceptional, but it comes quite late. But he gets a lot of land.

And this Emerald Charter he gives with an emerald to show his love for Douglas as such a good general and such a good friend.

And Douglas is, I think he ... at Bruce's new manor that he builds at Cardross in the late 1320s, that will be his retirement home. He doesn't like castles at all. He's got no castles left.

**Sarah:**

Right. He destroyed them all.

**Fiona:**

He pretty much had. Not absolutely all of them. I mean, not absolutely destroyed, but thrown down so that they can't be used by anyone. Well, the enemy.

So he builds, you know, he sticks to his principles. He builds a manor house near Dumbarton. And James Douglas has his own room. And I think he also got to design, you know, a side wall, not wallpaper, but a side wall.

So he was with the king a lot in the last year, 1328, because there's a peace, Bruce manages to exploit the difficult situation in England, the civil war in England, because Edward II was deposed by his wife, Isabella of France, and her new lover, Roger Mortimer, and they get rid of Edward II. But he's replaced by his son, Edward III, but he's too young, he's not ruling, and the Regency government decide that there's too many problems in England, and the Scots are now making trouble, they'll just settle with the Scots and make a peace treaty, which all the English and Edward III were utterly aghast at, because everyone knew that Bruce was getting on, and he would probably die fairly soon, and we'd just given them their independence, and signed away everything we fought for for the last 20-odd years.

So that was very unpopular, but Bruce extraordinarily got everything that he wanted, a peace treaty, peace with England and a year's time off.

But he didn't get to do what he really wanted to do, which was to go on crusade.

### **Sarah:**

Oh, is that what he...

### **Fiona:**

That was what they wanted to do. Partly, I mean, it's hard to know what was in his head. I mean, you've got to remember that in the 1270s when Edward I was still Prince Edward, he went on crusade and a lot of Scots, nobles – there's peace between Scotland and England – they went.

So certainly Bruce's grandfather and possibly his father both went to the Holy Land with Prince Edward on crusades. So it's very much part of the time.

At this point, the West had conquered Palestine, the Holy Land, but they've now lost it all to the rise of Islam and Muslim forces. They've conquered it in turn.

So it's very much something that people do. They take a crusading oath, and many of the Scots, including Robert Bruce, have done that. But obviously conditions were not really right for them to leave Scotland. And Bruce was too old and sick to go.

So what he did, you could argue as well he had one eye on the next life. He had been excommunicated by the Pope for not making peace with England. And so he'd be very... that was recanted... the Pope annulled that excommunication but only literally weeks... it would have arrived in Scotland weeks before Bruce died in 1329 so it was that close so he was aware that his immortal soul was perhaps not as shiny and clean as it could otherwise have been and so going on crusade was one way of helping with purgatory, that intervening period before you decide where you're going.

So it may have been about that, but I think it's more that that's just what you did. He's a warrior king in a time where crusading was really important.

**Sarah:**

And that comes into the story of his heart.

**Fiona:**

Absolutely. It was all carefully planned. He knew he was dying. As I say, he had a year between the treaty with England, and really the war was over as far as Bruce was concerned, so he had that period to consider his immortal soul, the next life, so he is...

**Sarah:**

That would have been heavily on his mind at that time.

**Fiona:**

Yeah, while he was busy trying to get this peace deal with England, while the war was still chuntering on, there wasn't much they could do. They did actually... because there was a lull. After 1323, 1324, the war wasn't really happening. It wasn't over but it wasn't really actually happening and there was efforts by Thomas Randolph to say to the Pope: 'can we go on crusade, you know you want a crusade, can we come?' and he was sort of saying, we haven't done enough yet; I want proper peace between Scotland and England. You haven't quite done enough yet. So the minute there was a proper peace... but, as I say, it was too late for Robert Bruce and he needed Thomas Randolph to stay and look after the kingdom after he was dead because his son was very wee. And so this was all carefully planned,

along with Bruce's body would go to Dunfermline Abbey, which was the great royal mausoleum. It's a bit like Westminster Abbey in England. It was where many of the kings of Scots were buried.

Not all of them. Alexander II is over here in Melrose. He's ordered up the white marble from Paris that's going to go over his tomb.

**Sarah:**

He's sorted it all out.

**Fiona:**

He gets Douglas and he says like look okay I want to make good on this crusading so I want you, I will be eviscerated, so when he dies his vital organs will be taken out and I want you to take my heart to the Holy Land. So it's Douglas's task...

**Sarah:**

It's Douglas again.

**Fiona:**

Douglas is his friend. Douglas is very happy to take on that responsibility and that's exactly what happened. Bruce dies in July 1329 at Cardross and he's eviscerated. Immediately his body is kind of embalmed and then there's a kind of pilgrimage and burial in Dunfermline Abbey and Douglas makes preparations to go.

Now, at this point in time, given that there's no actual crusade to the Holy Land, because even Douglas couldn't do it by himself, the most obvious place for him to go to is Spain, which has in the past, for hundreds of years, been under Muslim control. It's only been a tiny bit of Spain, but the Christians had been reconquering Spain. And at this point in time, it's the kingdom of Granada that's really the only one held by Muslims, reinforced from North Africa.

So, Alfonso XI of Spain, he's, well – Spain's not a unified country – Castile, that's who Douglas joins.

He goes, he sails to Flanders, and then obviously in state, he is representing Robert Bruce. So he's like a king in terms of how he presents himself and the wealth that he takes with him.

He then sails from Flanders to Spain, joins Alfonso, and they head down to Andalusia, the Muslim bit, and they join battle. The Moors are there in a place called Teba, which is kind of northwest of Malaga.

Alfonso has great experience of fighting the Moors, but obviously James Douglas doesn't. He's extremely, extremely experienced militarily in British terms. But unfortunately, he's never faced a Muslim opponent before and is taken in, and I do think this is supremely ironic given the way that Douglas fought. He's actually fooled by a Muslim strategy. They pretend to retreat, sort of go around the corner, and they're there.

And Douglas... Alfonso knows that they do this. He's experienced. Douglas doesn't, and he goes tanking after. The Scots go tanking after. The Muslims round the corner and go, ah...

**Sarah:**

Surprise.

**Fiona:**

Yes, surprise. He knew his number was up, and reputedly they charged, because they weren't going to take this line down. And he threw the heart, the casket, which he had round his neck.

**Sarah:**

Which had Robert...

**Fiona:**

Which had Robert Bruce's heart. He throws it ahead of him and charges. Douglas charges in and dies.

But the Muslims then repatriate, they give the bodies back, because most of the Scots, only one returns. They go back to Scotland and, of course, the heart, as pre-arranged, the heart comes to Melrose. And James Douglas is buried back in Douglas in his own church.

## Chapter 7

30:00

### **Sarah:**

The story of Bruce's heart is remarkable. Not just because of where it travelled, but because of the impact it has had on Scotland's history. Even centuries later, it continues to captivate people.

And not too long ago, this fascination led to an extraordinary rediscovery.

We were hearing from Richard about the moment Bruce's heart was found again within the walls or the floor of Melrose Abbey.

### **Richard:**

So I think when Gordon Ewart started the work in '96, he'd done his homework, he'd done his research, and he was well aware that there was a reburied heart casket. They just didn't know where or where precisely it was.

### **Sarah:**

Okay, okay.

### **Richard:**

So it wasn't an entire surprise when something did turn up. But the impact of its discovery took off fast and wild.

### **Sarah:**

Oh wow. Can you show us where it was found?

**Richard:**

I mean, when we're standing here, just watch your steps. Well, in fact, we can go down this way. Health and safety.

**Sarah:**

Through the route and the steps.

**Richard:**

The actual find spot was not... I'm trying to remember now because it's 30 years ago, don't forget.

**Sarah:**

Of course, the blink of an eye.

**Richard:**

But it had clearly been... a hole had been dug and it had been put in. It was at a skewy angle.

And I turned up a couple of... I think it was the following day actually, or a couple of days after, to come and see what was going on. Gordon had been in touch with us and the main concern was obviously the conservation of it and making sure that it was safe and secure.

And it was in this sort of general area from recollection. You could literally stand by the public barrier and look over and you could see it sitting covered by a bucket.

**Sarah:**

Oh, amazing. So it was kept dry. And do you remember getting that phone call to say, we think we found the heart?

**Richard:**

Well, it was a good excuse not to go into the office because I lived just down the road. So I was over here pretty sharpish, and just to see what was going on.

And, yeah, I do remember. I mean, I don't remember the detail of the call, but I think it was, I mean, it's always a delight to get out onto an excavation and see things in progress.

And I think Gordon was rightly concerned that... I mustn't put words in his mouth, but I think his focus of interest clearly was on the chapter house and understanding the archaeology of the chapter house.

And sometimes when you have excavations where you get sensational finds, they can overwhelm the interest.

And so his concern was to, come on Richard, can you just deal with this, sort this out, and we can get on with the main focus of the excavation.

**Sarah:**

So how did you go about that then, Richard?

**Richard**

Well, it was in a solid, it was a heavy, solid container. We lifted it and took it into Edinburgh to think of the next steps.

I mean, at this point, there hadn't been a press release. There'd been no information given out. So it was all quite quiet and low key.

**Sarah:**

That's quite exciting to be the first people to sort of know about the find. That'd be quite exciting.

**Richard:**

Yeah, I mean, I suppose, yes, I suppose that thought does go through your mind, but it's also, you know, you've got a job of work to do.

**Sarah:**

Yes, absolutely.

**Richard:**

I mean, one of the problems with a lead casket or a lead canister is it's lead. You can't x-ray it. So we have literally no idea what was inside it. Apart from the fact that there's a record from the 20s that there was a reburied heart casket.

And I suppose the other thing that I do recall from all those years ago was the frustration that clearly, particularly the media and the press felt, nothing seemed to happen fast from their point of view. Well, that's because it has to be a considered process.

And the excitement in the discovery, and as I was saying earlier about, you know, we were living at the time in a context of the sort of political ferment of devolution and Bruce and Mel Gibson.

And, you know, I mean, it was all quite exciting times. the changing times.

I think there were a lot of people, senior people, thinking, well, this needs handling. It needs to be, we need to get the right message out of there.

My focus was really just making sure that we had, we were looking after this, obviously, very interesting artefact, albeit a 19th century artefact, or 20th century artefact, as far as we were aware, but with something medieval inside it.

I don't think there was any question that we would have to open it up and find out. It was the way in which we opened it up in front of, I mean, it's no exaggeration, probably 30-plus photographers and journalists cramming into our conservation labs in Edinburgh.

This is before, I mean, we were talking in the 90s. This is before social media. They had all these camera lights. My memory was all these camera lights, hot lights, journalists shouting questions at me, cameras clicking, flashing, God knows what.

And we were sitting, we were standing, myself and Mandy were standing in front of this thing on a bench with this block. And I'm standing there thinking, OK, the show's started, which end should we chop off?

**Sarah:**

Had you decided it before?

**Richard:**

No, well I thought about it a bit but, you know, where do you put the cut. I mean all the practical problems of opening up a very, very heavy... I mean it was, the gauge of the metal was probably, I don't know, half a centimetre, centimetre thick. It was quite a thick wall of metal. And it's got a very obvious lid to it, this 1920s canister.

But the question in my mind was how did they put the medieval casket inside it? Did it make sense to have the lid as the base and you put the casket on the lid and then lower the cylinder over?

In other words, was the base of the casket in the lid or was the base of the casket at the bottom of the cylinder?

Are you following me?

**Sarah:**

Yes, I am.

**Richard:**

So how would they load it up the canister was what was going through my mind.

**Sarah:**

And there was no way to know that.

**Richard:**

No way to know.

**Sarah:**

Because like you said, you couldn't scan it.

**Richard:**

Toss a coin in my head and said, right, we're going to chop this bit off. And fortunately, we chopped the top off, the lid.

**Sarah:**

The lid.

**Richard:**

Which was a silly idea at the time in retrospect because it was the thickest part. And it was very hard work to cut it.

**Sarah:**

So what did you use to cut it?

**Richard:**

Literally, just take a saw to it.

**Sarah:**

A saw?

**Richard:**

Yeah, yeah.

**Sarah:**

So when you then cut open this canister, the lead canister, sawed it open and the lid fell off...

**Richard:**

And it was carefully removed yet.

**Sarah:**

Sorry, sorry, the lid was carefully placed inside.

**Richard:**

You want to know what was inside, don't you?

**Sarah:**

Yeah, what happens then?

**Richard:**

Well, we could see straight into it that it had been a good guess because the top of it, the top where we cut it, was the top of the conical top. The medieval casket is conical.

**Sarah:**

Great.

**Richard:**

It's about, I don't know, 20 centimetres tall, 10 centimetres wide at the base, and tapering to sort of three or four centimetres at the top.

**Sarah:**

Okay. So you hadn't damaged any of that when you sawed it off?

**Richard:**

Nothing. No, no. But we lifted it all out very gingerly.

You could see... again cameras click, click, click... but I mean you could see it sitting... I think what the press were expecting was we would then open it again.

**Sarah:**

Yeah, there and then.

**Richard:**

They were all coming, zooming in, waiting to get the actual first shot of the heart, pumping away there, but it was quite clear that the base of the casket had been damaged, not when we lifted it, but when it was being put back into the 20s cylinder and you could see in, but the dilemma was do you break open a medieval object in order to find out what's inside it or do you not?

Well, I think apart from... we had thought about it a bit beforehand because I think the idea of a heart falling out of this casket onto a laboratory bench in front of the world media didn't seem terribly tasteful, particularly since it was going around the world as being that of King Robert the Bruce, you know.

So the decision was very much in my mind, and we discussed it with senior colleagues before, we would... if we got the cylinder... if the casket came out, you would call that a cold hold.

**Sarah:**

Right, that was it, we stop there.

**Richard:**

But one of my friends and colleagues had an endoscope so we could... unfortunately the damage on the side of it was quite useful... because you could push this endoscope in and we could see inside that there was something in there and well, with the best will in the world, you can't say it was heart shaped. It was described rather inappropriately as a prune.

**Sarah:**

Right, okay.

**Richard:**

But I mean that was pretty much what it looked like.

And the way that we believe these medieval heart burials were done was the heart itself, when removed from the body, was plunged into hot tar to preserve it, which effectively roasted it. And it shrivelled down into a lump.

And it was a reasonable sized prune, maybe a little bit more...

**Sarah:**

Are we going to get into trouble for referring to Robert that Bruce's heart as a prune?

**Richard:**

Well, we did occasionally get picked up on it by my senior colleagues at the time... that's not too respectful to call it a prune.

**Sarah:**

But it's a good visual.

**Richard:**

But it was about that sort of size, you know, a large prune. And that's as far as we went. I'm trying to recall, and again I say it's a long time ago now, but I think our colleagues in the 20s may have opened it and seen it because I think there may be a photograph of it, of the prune.

**Sarah:**

Okay, so they opened that medieval casket. And what's that made of, that medieval casket?

**Richard:**

It's all lead as well, much thinner lead, but it's all lead.

## Chapter 8

41:32

**Sarah:**

Um, it's confession time. Never let the facts get in the way of a good story, right?

But I do have something to tell you.

Historians and archaeologists know that there are actually three heart caskets buried at Melrose Abbey.

Historians also know that one of those heart caskets belongs to Bruce.

So, well, we don't actually know that the heart casket that was discovered in 1996 and the one we're off to see right now, we don't know whether that is the heart of Bruce or not.

When they rediscovered the heart all those years ago, the team at Historic Scotland pondered doing DNA analysis and a whole load of other research on it. But this was 30 years ago. The technology didn't exist then in the same way it does now.

But does it matter? And would we really want to know?

**Richard:**

I think all that came beautifully together during the unveiling ceremony of the marker where Donald Dewar was presiding and did the unveiling.

And he was basically saying, I've probably got it written down somewhere, but I'm trying to remember his precise words.

**Sarah:**

I think I've got it written as well.

**Richard:**

"We cannot know for certain whether the casket buried here contains the heart of Robert the Bruce. But in a sense, it does not matter. The casket and the heart are symbols of the man."

I think that's beautifully put and very true.

**Sarah:**

So here we are. In front of the marker.

**Richard:**

This marker was designed by a woman called Victoria Oswald. There was a competition to design an appropriate marker. And Victoria was actually a BBC sound engineer.

But she came up with this rather lovely design, very simple design of a saltire cross with a heart in the middle and intertwined with the legend '*a noble heart may have no ease, give freedom fail*', which is a quotation from a poem by a chap called John Barbour in 1375, I think.

So it was carved in stone and this marks the spot where the modern canister, which we had, because obviously I'd hacked the top off the 1920s one, I'd vandalised that. That was put in storage.

**Sarah:**

In a special place. Looked after appropriately.

**Richard:**

It's an artefact in its own right, but it wasn't possible to reuse it. And so we had a new one made and it has that rather beautifully built, soldered onto the front of it.

So it makes it very much clearly what it is. And then it was put into a box, wrapped in glass wool to make it a good inert environment. And then it's placed into... it's quite deep down.

One of the concerns in the minds of a lot of the senior staff, and I think among the police at the time, was that the site, that Melrose Abbey might get attacked.

And I think there was a ferment of nationalistic feeling. When all this was happening in July, the excavations here, John Major had just announced that the Stone of Destiny was going to be returned to Scotland. And that involved myself and various others organising the return.

So there was a lot of things going on around. And there was a lot of strong feeling about Bruce's heart, about Stone of Destiny, all these things.

So security was quite, you know, we were quite mindful about how it was done. So underneath here, there is quite an elaborate setup to protect the site.

And there was a small private ceremony on the 22nd of July, where the box was placed in and we covered the site and set all this up.

And two days later, on the anniversary of the Battle of Bannockburn, Bruce's victory, the unveiling by Donald Dewar took place.

And I mean, it's looking weathered after 30-odd years, but it's still here and people come a long way to come and see it.

**Sarah:**

Oh, that's lovely.

**Richard:**

I wore a suit that day.

**Sarah:**

Is that unusual for you?

**Richard:**

It is for me.

## **Chapter 9**

46:47

**Sarah:**

Melrose Abbey is a place of devotion. And whether or not this heart, buried right here, truly belonged to Bruce, it remains a powerful symbol. Not just of one man, but of Scotland itself.

A heart beats with purpose and this beat endures even after death. Bruce's was taken from his body, sent on a final journey and laid to rest here. It became more than just flesh and blood. It became an idea. A symbol of loyalty, of leadership and of the relentless fight for freedom, and even today, standing here centuries later, it still speaks to us, not as proof of the past, but as a reminder of struggle, of legacy, and the stories we choose to carry forward.

This has been the Historic Scotland podcast.

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

Next time we're off to Stanley Mills, a place of innovation, industry and incredible tales of community and friendships frozen in time,

See you then.