

Did Shakespeare Beat Dan Brown to Rosslyn Chapel?

The history of Rosslyn is fragmented and full of legends. What is more, the legends of Rosslyn Chapel and Castle are closely connected to the legends of King Arthur, the Knights of the Round Table and the quest for the Holy Grail.

Arthurian legends were immensely popular in medieval Scotland. Children were named after the knights, and tournaments were held emulating those of King Arthur's. There is a story of a young Merlin who saved himself from sacrifice by revealing a tale of two dragons fighting – a red and a white dragon. The white dragon representing Saxon invaders. A carving in the Chapel of two dragons fighting is said to refer to this story.



A carving in the Chapel showing two dragons fighting.

But what does Welsh legend have to do with Scotland? Arthur would have fought at least one battle in Scotland, and one of Merlin's names links him with the Caledonian forest, which at the time would have covered much of southern and central Scotland.



Merlin is depicted in woodland dictating his prophecies to a scribe in this c.1200s miniature.

It is likely that the real Merlin was not an ancient wizard with a pointy hat and a long white beard. He was more likely a wild man of the woods, driven mad by battle and the gift of prophecy.

Storytellers recounted the valiant deeds of Arthur's knights, and writers composed verse and tales of battle and courtly love. The world has a long history of storytellers and bards, one of the UK's most famous bards being Shakespeare. Is it possible that Shakespeare visited Rosslyn long before Dan Brown heard of it?

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Sounds implausible? Well, there is some historical evidence to support this suggestion. Up to a year before the Scottish reformation of 1560 the ever popular morality plays were still being performed at Rosslyn by travelling actors. Could one of the actors have been Shakespeare?

The visits of these travelling actors, who were often confused with gypsies, are well established. In 1559 William St Clair, Lord Justice General under Mary, Queen of Scots, is said to have saved a gypsy from the gallows at Boroughmuir near Edinburgh and so, out of gratitude, the travelling people congregated annually thereafter at Roslin Glen.

As a result the St Clair family developed a long-term relationship with the gypsies and every May and June they came to Rosslyn to perform morality, mystery and other traditional religious plays. The actors were provided with accommodation in two of the Roslin Castle towers, appropriately named Robin Hood and Little John.

We do know that in 1618 the English playwright Ben Jonson came to Hawthornden Castle just down the river Esk from Rosslyn Chapel, to visit the poet William Drummond.

A written record of their conversations was found in the Advocates Library and published for the Shakespeare Society in 1842. Along with this well-documented visit there is also a tradition that Shakespeare travelled to Scotland at the request of King James VI who in 1599 had pleaded with Queen Elizabeth I to send a company of players north of the border to perform for him.



William Drummond (1585-1649), the Scottish poet, was born at Hawthornden Castle, about a mile east of Rosslyn Chapel.

The actors, thought to have included Shakespeare, are said to have passed Glamis Castle on their way to Aberdeen. Visiting that part of Scotland is said to have given Shakespeare the motive to write *Macbeth*.

The Perth Kirk Session minutes detail the authorisation of one performance by Shakespeare's company, *The King's Men*. The company's manager is listed in Aberdeen city records as Lawrence Fletcher, who was later to collaborate with Shakespeare in the construction of the Globe Theatre.

Another possibility is that Shakespeare may have come north in 1603 when the London theatres were closed during an outbreak of plague. Possibly, as Ben Jonson would do in 1618, he too called on William Drummond at Hawthornden. Certainly, Drummond was well acquainted with the works of Shakespeare: in his later years he donated around 500 books to his old university, Edinburgh, including several early printed editions of Shakespeare plays.

Specifically the text of Shakespeare's rural comedy, *As You Like It* (1599), may reflect some awareness of Roslin Glen and its Arcadian landscape. The play was an attempt to satisfy London's popular taste for Robin Hood plays such as those presented annually by gypsies in the Stanks, the marshy flood plain of the North Esk River below Rosslyn Castle.



An illustrated scene from *As You Like It* depicting the Forest of Arden could have similarities with Roslin Glen.

Central to the plot is a duke who enjoys the calm and integrity which closeness to nature brings; among the other main players is the love-sick heroine Rosalind, a name suspiciously close to Rosslyn. In the play's *Song of Amiens, Under the Greenwood Tree*, the beauty of Roslin Glen is suggested by Shakespeare's many references to the links between the human race and animals and plants.

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Shakespeare may have celebrated the wildness of Roslin Glen, but in the following centuries Roslin's reputation as a unique location of beauty and mystery was to be celebrated by many poets.

On 13 June 1787 Robert Burns and the artist Alexander Nasmyth (1758-1840) who had been working on a portrait of the poet, set off for the Pentland hills after a session in an Edinburgh hostelry which had lasted into the wee sma' hours. They had breakfast at Roslin Inn and Burns so enjoyed the meal that he scratched a short humorous poem onto a pewter plate dedicated to the Inn's hostess, Annie Wilson.

It was Sir Walter Scott however, whose summer home Lasswade Cottage, was only a short walk away, who would use Rosslyn Chapel as a powerful inspiration for *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* and his poem *The Gray Brother*. Scott's residence at Lasswade Cottage was an added attraction for many of Scott's literary friends, such as the poet William Wordsworth who wrote a sonnet called *Composed in Rosslyn Chapel During a Storm*. These writers and poets gave Rosslyn Chapel its reputation for beauty and mystery.

Shakespeare's visit to Rosslyn may or may not be true, but whatever the case, in spite of the title of Dan Brown's novel, when construction started on Rosslyn Chapel in the 1440s, Leonardo da Vinci was only 12 years old!

Acknowledgements

Adapted from an article by Michael TRB Turnbull in *The Scotsman*, 24 September 2009 and reproduced with his kind permission. Michael Turnbull is the author of *Rosslyn Chapel Revealed: The History Press 2009*.

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Sir Walter Scott's summer home, Lasswade Cottage, was a short walk from Rosslyn Chapel and attracted guests such as the poet William Wordsworth.