

# Highland Mary

*& Inverclyde's link  
to Robert Burns*

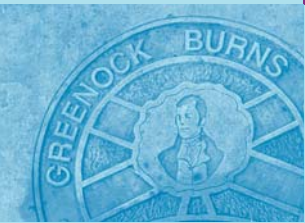


*Highland Mary's headstone*



*Marble statue of Highland Mary & Robert Burns*

*“She has my heart,  
She has my hand,  
By secret troth and  
honours band,  
Till the mortals stroke  
Shall lay me low  
I’m thine my  
highland lassie O”*



*Greenock Burns Club logo*

**Inverclyde**  
council

# Robert Burns & Inverclyde

Robert Burns' first patron, James Cunningham, 14th Earl of Glencairn was born at Finlaystone near Langbank in 1749. He was one of the Representative Scottish Peers in the House of Lords from 1780-1784 and was patron of the parish of Kilmarnock. In 1785 he inspired Burn's satire *The Ordination* when he appointed a staunch Conservative, the Reverend William McKinlay, to fill a parish vacancy.

Alexander Dalziel, who was the Earl's factor, was responsible for introducing him to the work of Burns. Consequently, when Burns went to Edinburgh in 1786 with a letter of introduction to the Earl from Dalrymple of Orangefield, the Earl was familiar with some of his work. He became Burn's patron, introducing him to the social and literary circles in Edinburgh.

Robert Burns is known to have visited Glencairn at Finlaystone. As if to verify his visit, he scratched his name on a window pane and added the date of the bottle that he and the Earl were drinking.

The Earl went to Portugal in the Autumn of 1790 for health reasons but returned to England where he died in January 1791. Burn's sadness at the death of his patron, after whom he named one of his sons James Glencairn Burns, is contained in the words of the Lament for James, Earl of Glencairn.

*"The mother may forget the child,  
That smiles sae sweetly on her knee,  
But I'll remember thee,  
Glencairn And a'that thou has done for me!"*

Although there are a number of reasons why Robert Burns could have visited Inverclyde, little concrete evidence exists apart from the fact that he visited Finlaystone.

Burns may have visited Highland Mary's grave in Greenock during his Highland Tour of 1787 and it is suggested that he visited the Crawford family at Cartsburn House. He is thought to have stayed in Port Glasgow with Captain Richard Brown, whom he had originally met in Irvine in



the early 1780s. When they had first met Burns was impressed by Brown's worldliness and their friendship grew over a number of years. By 1789 Richard Brown was master of the ship *Mary and Jean* sailing between Greenock and Granada. His house, which was demolished some years ago, was in the Bay Street area of Port Glasgow. Richard Brown was an enthusiastic supporter of the Greenock Ayrshire Society, which was formed at about the time of Burn's death, and it is more likely that he was a founder member of Greenock Burns Club.



Finlaystone Estate



# Highland Mary

Mary Campbell or Highland Mary was born in a thatched cottage on Auchnamore Farm near Dunoon. Her father, Archie Campbell, was a seaman. In 1773, when he became part owner of a sloop which carried coal between Troon, Ardrossan and Campbeltown, the family moved to Campbeltown.

At 14 years old Mary started working as an under nursemaid.

At first she was employed near her home and later moved to work on Arran with the family of David Campbell, a Catechist, who was related to her mother. Eventually she moved to work in Ayrshire. As she was a Gaelic speaker, she spoke English with a Highland lilt and was given the nickname Highland Mary.

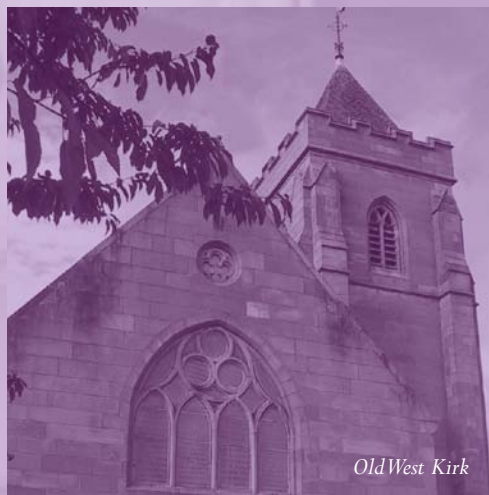
How she met Burns is a mystery. Some sources suggest that she first encountered Robert Burns at the church, which they both attended, when she worked at the Castle of Montgomery near the Ayrshire village of Tarbolton. Others recount how they met at group picnics. What is known is that their romance developed and Mary went to work for Gavin Hamilton, who was a close friend of Burns.

At this time Burns was known to be involved with Jean Armour. In March 1786, Jean was pregnant and to avoid disgrace the Armours sent her to live with her uncle in Paisley. To satisfy the Scots marriage laws it was necessary to have a statement signed

before a witness. Jean Armour and Robert Burns appear to have “married” and even though their certificate was destroyed by Jean’s father it was not invalidated.

On 14th May Mary had her final meeting with Burns on the banks of the Fail, a tributary of the Ayr. They washed their hands in the water before exchanging bibles and plighting their troth. There is no trace of the bible which Mary gave Burns.

The two volume Bible which Mary received was handed down through the Campbell family to William Anderson, Mary’s nephew, who emigrated to Canada in 1834. He sold the Bible to a group of Burns enthusiasts who were resident in Montreal and they loaned it to the Provost of Ayr. It is on display at the Alloway Monument. Although the inscriptions are smudged, sufficient letters remain to read ‘Mary’ in one volume and ‘Robert’ in the other.



Old West Kirk

In the song “The Highland Lassie O” Burns wrote:

*“She has my heart, she has my hand,  
By secret troth and honour’s band,  
Till the mortal stroke shall lay me low,  
I’m thine, my Highland Lassie O!”*  
- which suggests that some type of “marriage” had taken place.

Mary left her work in Ayrshire and sailed from Greenock to Campbeltown shortly after this meeting. In the autumn she returned to Greenock with her father. To honour her brother Robert’s success on becoming an apprentice carpenter at Scott’s Shipyard. They lodged with their relations, the MacPhersons, who lived at 31 Upper Charles Street in the centre of the town.

There is a theory that Mary returned to her family in the summer of 1786 in order to prepare for emigration to Jamaica with Burns. Perhaps this is based on his writing:  
*“Will ye go to the Indies, my Mary,  
And leave auld Scotia’s shore?  
Will ye go to the Indies, my Mary,  
Across th’Atlantic’s roar?”*

Burn’s *Kilmarnock* edition resulted in his receiving patronage in the autumn of 1786. Emigration was postponed and finally forgotten as his finances recovered due to the popularity of his work.

In October Mary’s brother Robert developed typhus which was prevalent in the Greenock area. While nursing him, Mary caught the disease and died on 20th or 21st October 1786. She was buried in the MacPherson lair at the Old West Kirk.

# Highland Mary's Grave

As Burn's poetry increased in popularity, interest in Highland Mary was aroused. Although the Burns Club suggested a memorial to mark her grave as early as 1803, it was not until the 25th January 1842 that the foundation stone was laid in the Old West Kirk yard by Patrick Maxwell Stewart who was the Member of Parliament for Renfrewshire.

According to a report published in the Greenock Advertiser on 23rd January 1842 a sealed bottle containing an inscription, coins and newspapers was placed in the cavity of a stone. The inscription read: *"The structure which is over this stone has been erected by the contributions of many admirers of Scotia's Bard in memory of his early love Mary Campbell or Highland Mary."*



*Highland Mary's Headstone*

The Old West Kirk was in an area near to the harbours. In order to allow for Harland & Wolff's shipyard to expand, the church was moved to its present site on the Esplanade in 1926. Although some of the grave stones were taken to the new site, Highland Mary's remains and monument were moved to Greenock Cemetery.

In 1917 the Burn's Federation appointed a committee to deal with the logistics of moving Highland Mary's grave from the Old Kirk yard. On 8th November 1920, the remains of Highland Mary were disinterred and put in an oak casket, supervised by Greenock Burns Club.

The bottom board of an infant's coffin was found in Mary's grave and this caused speculation that the cause of Mary's death may have been premature childbirth brought on by her fever.

Considerable research, which included dating the board, has established that the child's coffin was placed in the grave some 40 years after Highland Mary's death. It is likely that the child was the daughter of a ship's captain called Duncan Hendry who was related to the Macphersons. Agnes Hendry, who was born on 4th January 1827, died on 27th February 1827 and was buried in the MacPherson's grave.

On 13th November 1920, Mary's casket was reinterred in Greenock Cemetery. Members of Greenock Burns Club carried the bier and the service was attended by representatives of several Burns Clubs and numerous Burns enthusiasts.



# Greenock Burns Club *(The Mother Club)*

At the end of the eighteenth century, a considerable number of Ayrshire born merchants were living in the Inverclyde area. These men, some of whom knew Burns, founded the Greenock Ayrshire Society in 1795. It had a charitable function providing education for able children from poor homes and helping the needy financially.

Members of the Greenock Ayrshire Society were responsible for forming the first Burns Club in Greenock in 1801. Captain Richard Brown and Alexander Dalziel are thought to have been members, but it was Neil Dougall, the composer of the tune *Kilmarnock*, who was the first person to sign the Club records.

The Club's aims, to encourage the reading of Burns's works, the singing of his songs and to foster national pride in Robert Burns, continue today.

The first Burns's Supper was held on January 29th 1802 to celebrate what they believed to be Burns's birthday. In 1803 Burns's admirers, including members of the Greenock Club, had the Ayr Parish records checked. As a result the bard's date of birth was found to be 25th January 1759.

Greenock Burns's Club, known as the Mother Club, celebrates two main events each year, St Andrew's Night in November and their Burns's Supper in January. Their centenary and bicentenary celebrations were held in Greenock Town Hall.

The funds of the Club have always been spent on charitable and educational schemes. The Greenock Post Office Directories for the 19th century and up until 1915 refer to an annual competition run by the Burns Club for local school children. Prizes were awarded for "*proficiency in singing and reciting the poems of Burns and other Scottish literature*".

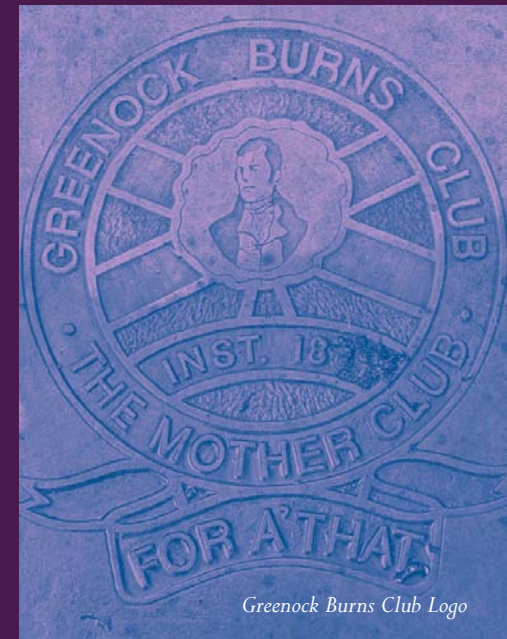
There were also wild flower competitions held in the Autumn for the best collection of wild flowers, grasses, ferns, bouquets of wild flowers and window plants. The Mother Club still encourages schools' poetry competitions but there are no recent references to awards being given for wild flower collections.

During the blitz in 1941, the building in Nicolson Street in which the Mother Club had its rooms was one of the casualties. Many of the treasures were removed for safekeeping and were never traced. Books and other archive material, which were in store in a basement while the building was refurbished, were damaged by dampness. After the war, Greenock Corporation, which owned 36 Nicolson Street, allowed the Burns Club to use their meeting room provided that they did not display keepsakes or allow access to non members.

After years of looking for alternative accommodation the Greenock Burns Club has a new home in a room within the Watt Library. Even now access is restricted to Members of the Burns Club and the general public may not visit the room unless special arrangements have been made through the Club.

Many changes have taken place since Greenock Burns Club was founded. At the Burns Centenary Dinner in 1859, ladies were permitted to view the after dinner entertainment from the Gallery in the Town Hall. In the late 1970's, ladies were admitted to the Mother Club and in 1986 the first lady member and Club Bard, Mabel Irving, became the first lady to be President.

Worldwide links with other clubs are maintained through the exchange of greetings which are sent and received by The Mother Club. Burns Clubs have been established wherever Scottish people have settled, from Bahrain to Canada and Indonesia to Mexico. These clubs, both international and nearer to home in Gourock and Port Glasgow, have a special regard for their Greenock based Mother Club.



*Greenock Burns Club Logo*

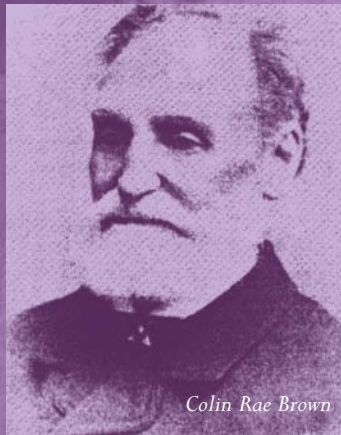
## *Colin Rae Brown*

Colin Rae Brown, a name well known to Burnsians, was born in Greenock in 1821. His family had links with the Old West Kirk which may have kindled his interest in Highland Mary and Robert Burns.

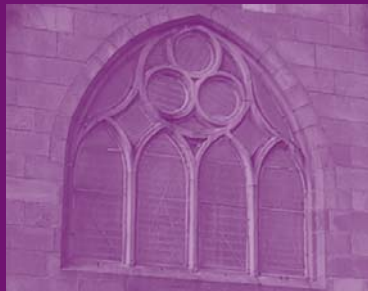
In the early 1840's, Colin Rae Brown worked for a stationers and bookshop, Brown and McCallum which had premises at 4 Hamilton Street, Greenock. Later he wrote for the Daily Bulletin, a Scottish daily paper printed in Glasgow. Finally moved to live and work in London.

He was president of the Mother Club in 1844, 1845 and 1847. Through his enthusiasm for Burns, the London Burns Club was formed in 1868. He was its President for 12 years and in 1885 he helped found the Burns Federation. It was on his suggestion that the Federation undertake the published Burns Chronicle in 1891.

Today the Burns Federation has affiliated Clubs in 16 countries and the membership is in excess of 80,000.



*Colin Rae Brown*



Inverclyde is within an hour's drive of Kilmarnock and Ayr. By following the Burns Heritage Trail, visitors can see places of interest, including Failford, which were associated with Burn's life in Ayrshire and Dumfries.

For further information on Burns in Ayrshire contact Visit Scotland:  
[www.visitscotland.com](http://www.visitscotland.com)



*Highland Mary's headstone*



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For more information contact: **01475 715555**  
**[www.inverclyde.gov.uk](http://www.inverclyde.gov.uk)**