City Walking Tour Transcripts

Dr Elsie Maud Inglis Hospice, 219 High Street
Hello and welcome to the National Galleries of Scotland City Walking Tour. In this series, we’ll journey along Edinburgh’s Royal Mile exploring stories and places connected to Scottish art in the National Galleries of Scotland. We’ll also chat to local experts to uncover hidden stories about the sights on this historic street, and why they are still important today.

At 219 High Street you will find the site of the original Dr Elsie Maud Inglis hospice, marked by a bronze plaque on the wall. On display at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery is a bronze portrait sculpture of Dr Inglis by the internationally renowned Croatian sculptor Ivan Mestrovic. She is depicted holding a book, her gaze focused on reading its pages. Created in 1918, the sculpture was presented to the Scottish nation by the Serbian government as a token of gratitude for Dr Inglis’s work with the Scottish Women’s Hospital during the First World War. Who was Elsie Inglis, and how is she connected to the Royal Mile? Local Blue Badge Guide Hannah Mackay Tait tells us her fascinating story.

My name is Hannah Mackay Tait and I’m a Blue Badge Guide in Edinburgh. I recently helped to run a series of walking tours about Dr Elsie Inglis to raise funds for a statue in her memory.

Elsie Inglis was born in India in 1864 to Harriet Thomson and John Inglis. Her father worked for the East India Company and the Indian Civil Service while India was still a British colony, and Elsie spent her youth there before returning to Edinburgh with her family as a teenager. Despite growing up in the Victorian era, when even wealthy women were excluded from higher education, Elsie was always interested in pursuing a medical career. With the unwavering support of her father, she even founded the Edinburgh College of Medicine for Women in 1889 to allow her and other women to become doctors.

She was also a tireless suffrage campaigner. Her frustration with the poor standard of medical care available to women at the time was one of the factors that motivated her to become both a doctor and a women’s rights activist.

In 1914, Elsie’s two passions came together to create the defining achievement of her career: the Scottish Women’s Hospitals for Foreign Service. Their medical units, funded by suffrage organisations and fully staffed with female medical professionals, served across Europe from France to Serbia during the First World War. They were brave and effective doctors and nurses, serving in dangerous war zones with great distinction.

By the time of her death in November 1917, Dr Inglis was so respected that she received a state funeral at St Giles Cathedral, attended by members of the British and Serbian royal families. She was particularly dedicated to providing maternity care for women in poverty, 50 years before the NHS made medical care available to everyone.

In 1899, she founded a hospital called the George Square Nursing Home. It had just seven beds and stood in George Square where the Crystal MacMillan building is today. But this more affluent area of the city wasn’t the best place to serve the women who most needed care, and when the lease was up in 1904 they moved to 219 High Street, in the heart of the then-impoverished Old Town. It was known as the Hospice, but it was a hospital, rather than a hospice in the modern sense. They worked
with some of the city’s poorest women, often waiving their fees or paying for patients to recuperate at the seaside away from the filthy conditions of the Old Town slums.

As well as providing maternity care and covering women’s health, they worked with children suffering from childhood diseases like polio. It was challenging work in a challenging environment, at a time before access to antibiotics, vaccines, or many of the effective treatments we have today.

Although Dr Inglis had become a national hero by the time of her death, her story began to fade from our collective memory. From 1925 to 1988, the Elsie Inglis Memorial Maternity Hospital at Abbeyhill kept her name in Edinburgh’s public imagination, with generations of the city’s babies born in “Elsie’s”. But look around our streets today and you’ll find only small plaques celebrating her legacy. In recent years there have been efforts to revive Elsie’s legacy and celebrate her with a statue on the Royal Mile outside her former hospital. Incredibly, it would be the very first statue of a named woman in Edinburgh city centre.

St Giles Cathedral, High Street
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St Giles’ Cathedral is located on the Royal Mile, a 10-minute walk from Edinburgh Castle. It’s an Edinburgh landmark which is depicted in countless views of the city in the National Galleries of Scotland collection. One of these is *South View of St Giles, Edinburgh* by R McPherson. Dated 1799, this etched and engraved print shows the Cathedral face on, and we can see its distinctive crown spire. With the nearby tenements and commercial buildings included in the view, McPherson’s print gives us a sense of the bustling 18th-century city. The cathedral’s interior is no less spectacular, dendrochronologist Dr Coralie Mills tells us more about the wooden features found inside, and her work to trace their origins.

Hello, my name is Coralie Mills and I’m a dendrochronologist which means I study tree ring patterns in old timbers to work out their date and provenance. I’ve worked in Scotland for a long time and I’ve worked on many interesting buildings over that time, but perhaps one of the most exciting was the Bell Tower at St Giles Cathedral on the Royal Mile in Edinburgh.

The opportunity to work on this building came about through a research project I’m undertaking called the ‘South East Scotland Oak Dendrochronology project’, which is supported by Historic Environment Scotland, and the main objective is to build up the native oak tree ring record, for South East Scotland. This is quite a challenge, because our timber record is dominated by imported timber, much of it from Scandinavia. And that is because Scotland was already very short of homegrown timber by the later medieval period.

I started by drawing up a long list of potential candidate buildings that might have surviving historic timbers in them, and I went to visit many of them to investigate the timbers and see whether they might be suitable. From there I created a shortlist of potential candidate buildings that I took samples from, and one of them was St Giles Cathedral.
With the kind permission of the Kirk session there, I was allowed to take a number of samples from the five story timber frame that is inside the tower under the crown spire which many of you will be familiar with.

Samples were taken using a power drill with a special coring device attached, and this allows a very narrow cylinder of wood to be extracted from a beam. We took a number of such samples, their surfaces were prepared and then the tree ring widths were measured under a microscope as a sequence for each sample, and then compared with each other. They nearly all matched each other, they formed a very coherent group, and when their sequences were averaged together, that average record was then compared with reference data of known date and place.

I was delighted to discover that this was indeed medieval oak, and that it was native oak. The timber came from North East Scotland, and the closest match was with the Great Hall at Darnaway Castle, in Morayshire, at the heart of the royal forest of Darnaway, which used to supply many prestigious building projects in the later medieval period.

The dates obtained from this analysis were really interesting too, I got felling dates of the winter of 1453 - 54 and the winter of 1459 - 1460, and these both fall within the reign of James II. And I think it’s amazing now everytime I walk past St Giles Cathedral, to think of that amazing structure inside the tower that has survived for all these centuries and still has stories to tell.

The Witches Well, Castlehill
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John Duncan is well represented in the National Galleries of Scotland collection. He was a prominent figure in the late 19th and early 20th-century Scottish Celtic Revival movement, which looked to ancient Scottish history and culture to inspire artworks across various art and design disciplines. One of Duncan’s most famous paintings, Saint Bride, can be found at the Scottish National Gallery on Princes Street not too far from here. A less well-known work of his – The Witches’ Well – can be found on the Royal Mile, at Castlehill, on the west-facing wall of the Tartan Weaving Mill.

Commissioned by town planner Sir Patrick Geddes in 1894, the well is a drinking fountain which commemorates the women and men executed nearby after being found guilty of witchcraft. The centre of the plaque features the dates 1479 and 1722 in Roman numerals on the top left and bottom right corners. These are the main years in which the persecutions took place. The fountain’s symbolic design is typical of Duncan’s style and interest in spiritualism. This can be seen in the imagery of the snake and the witches which symbolise both perspectives of those involved in the trials, and the conflict between whose side represented good or evil. The text above was a later addition to the well in 1912. Claire Mitchell QC and author Zoe Venditozzi, who co-host The Witches of Scotland podcast, explain the context of The Witches’ Well and their particular interest in it.

ZV: Hello, my name is Zoe Venditozzi, and I am one of the co-campaigners for the Witches of Scotland campaign.

CM: I am Claire Mitchell QC, founder and co-campaigner with Zoe Venditozzi, of the Witches of Scotland campaign. We have three aims, the first aim is to get a formal apology for those that were accused of witchcraft, and we’re delighted to see that on International Women’s Day 2022, Nicola Sturgeon gave that apology. The second aim is to legislate to pardon those that were convicted, and that work’s ongoing, and the third aim is to obtain a national monument.
The idea for Witches of Scotland came to me, in fact, when I was standing in Princes Street Gardens, thinking about the well, which was up above, on the esplanade. And I was thinking about what the well said, and the well described the people that had been killed as witches, and said that some people used their powers for good, and some people used their powers for evil. And I thought that, although that did mark the spot were women and men were killed as witches, what it didn’t do is properly reflect the fact that these weren’t witches, they were people, and that they died in a terrible miscarriage of justice.

ZV: One of the things that we’d really like to see happen is have a memorial that is really engaging, and helps to not only mark the people that were accused and executed for witchcraft in Scotland during these terrible times, but also lets people know that there’s more to learn about it and about Scotland’s history more generally. So we’d like to see something that’s much more imaginative, and much truer, much more faithful to what actually happened in these times.

CM: We would like something which would make people think about their history in a much more deep way, and make people engage with the idea of the history of Scotland. Edinburgh is absolutely steeped in the history of Scotland, but one thing it does leave out to a great extent is the history of women, and we think by putting a memorial in Scotland to the history of women, which is unfortunately also the history of witchcraft, we would be doing a great service to let people remember what happened to these people, so that it never happens again.

ZV: We think we’ve got a really great opportunity in Scotland because we’ve got such a strong art scene, there are so many fantastic artists that are from Scotland or based in Scotland, who could create something really thought-provoking, and something that would really start a conversation about what happened. And also about current issues that are linked to what happened in those days, so we’d like to see something that’s really unusual, maybe not even necessarily a statue, just something that is there, and it is thoughtful, and is going to make people connect with what actually happened.

CM: The fact is that the castle esplanade, although it is where those people died, it doesn’t properly represent what happened to those people, and that’s why we think it’s important that we properly reflect our history in public spaces. To have a memorial which calls people witches, to say that some used their powers for good, and some used their powers for evil fundamentally misunderstands what the Scottish witch trials were about. They were about innocent people, who were swept up in witchcraft accusations, a literal witch-hunt, where people lost their lives and we think it would be important to properly record that as a terrible miscarriage of justice. Rather than having what Duncan’s well has at the moment, which seems to suggest that what happened was witches really were killed there, and that some of them deserved their fate.