

WALKS around PORTOBELLO

Literary Portobello

Description: A brief stroll around some of the literary life and history of Portobello.

Length: Almost three miles for the full circuit via Joppa Pans; or half that by going down James Street and returning along the Promenade.

Time: An hour or two.

Terrain: Standard town footpaths.



Harry Lauder, “patron saint of tartanalia”, regarded this house as his birthplace (in 1870), but more likely to have been in the humbler Bridge Street Lane.

Arthur Conan Doyle’s earliest memory was of his grandmother, with whom he lived for key childhood years.



Birthplace of Long John Silver: W.E. Henley was convalescing at 4 Straiton Place when visited by his friend Robert Louis Stevenson – who based Long John Silver on him. Henley’s daughter Margaret was the inspiration for Wendy in *Peter Pan*.



Hugh Miller, a founding father of modern geology, lived here 1854–1856. The building that housed his museum is still here.

(Library)
(Town Hall)

Sir Walter Scott was a frequent visitor to his son-in-law John Lockhart & family, and wrote tales for his grandchildren who lived here. Scott’s arrangements for King George IV’s memorable visit to Scotland in 1822 included a military review on Portobello Sands.

Tom Buchan, poet, dramatist, and with Billy Connolly the creator of *The Great Northern Welly Boot Show*, lived at 10 Pittville Street.



The Mulgrays, who live on the Promenade, are the first twins in the world to write a novel together in English – about the exploits of DJ Smith and her cat Gorgonzola.

In a 1903 spoof Sherlock Holmes pursued Mair Macjigger in Bath Street.



Grace Corbett and her sister Walterina Cunningham chronicled life in Portobello in the early 19th century when it was a fashionable watering hole, in such books as *The Odd Volume* and *The Busy-bodies*. They are buried in Old Parish Church graveyard.

David Laing was the ‘Prince of Scottish Literary Antiquarians’. His villa was here, and the building that housed his extensive library still exists.

Writers who live in Portobello:

Grahame Howard (*The Euthanasia Protocol*)
Doug Johnstone (*Gone Again, Hit & Run, The Ossians*).
Anne Loughnane (*In Pursuit of Kate Corbett*).
Alice Thompson (*Existential Detective, Burnt Island*).
Janet Watson (*Nothing ever happens in Wentbridge*).

Jules Verne—father of Science Fiction—“skinny-dipped” in Portobello in 1859.

Portobello is home to several published historians, including:

Donald Bloxham
Gary Dickson
Archie Foley Pat Kelly
Trevor Royle
Ian S. Wood Jenny Wormald

Robert Chambers lived here when his father was manager of the salt works at Joppa Pans. He later wrote *Vestiges of Creation*, an immensely popular work published anonymously in 1844 which Charles Darwin believed helped pave the way for evolution and *Origin of Species*.

Eric Lomax (‘The Railway Man’) grew up at 11 Bedford Terrace.

Anne Douglas’s *The Road to the Sands* is set in Portobello.

The definitive book about Portobello up to the end of the 19th century is William Baird’s *Annals of Duddingston and Portobello*.

Breathes there the man with soul so dead
Who never to himself hath said
“This is my own, my native land!”

Sir Walter Scott

(Lines that may have come to him as he exercised his horse on Portobello beach)

Hame o’ mine, hame o’ mine,
Where I dwelt in lang, lang syne
That’s where my hert and my thoughts are forever,
The wee thackit cottage,
That dear hame o’ mine.

Harry Lauder

She’s a bonnie sight to be gaun through Portobello—the hale town will be speaking o’ her, but let them speak—I’ll no fash to tell her the awfu’ mountebank she has made o’ hersel, just for the dirdum she gied me about her shoon; but we may as weel gang up and see if she has minded to lock the press—if that’s open, we’ll hear news the day. I think, by the road she has taken, she’s awa to her cronie Miss Mackinlay—she’s unco fond o’ going there when the brother’s down.

(The Busy-Bodies)

... Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds and shall find me unafraid.
It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.

(Invictus, W.E. Henley).

Portobello was a place where you could find anonymity, and Will enjoyed the faded seaside resort’s genteel seediness because it demanded nothing from him. The pale, deserted Promenade that ran along the edge of the flat sea, the mishmash of small Georgian cottages and red stone tenements and the amusement arcade seemed to represent to Will his own pleasurable disillusionment.

(The Existential Detective, Alice Thompson)

‘Is that Mr Douglas?’

‘Yes.’

‘Nathan’s dad?’ His stomach lurched. ‘Yeah, that’s right. What is it, is Nathan OK?’

‘He’s fine. This is Mrs Hignet from the office at Towerbank. It’s just to say that no one has come to pick Nathan up from school, that’s all, and we were wondering if there was a problem of some kind.’

(Gone Again, Doug Johnstone)

That evening, she sat with John Rebus in her Portobello home. They ate Chinese takeaway ... After the food, they walked down to the promenade. Kids on skateboards, looking American but sounding pure Porty, swearing like troopers. One chip shop open, that childhood smell of hot fat and vinegar. ... Portobello itself was fine, pretty relaxed.

(The Falls, Ian Rankin)

I even remember the precise date: 12th September 1932. We were crossing Park Bridge ... I looked down—into a new world. Below me was a shiny heavy web of iron and wood ... Portobello Goods Yard. That was the start of my incurable interest in railways.

(The Railway Man, Eric Lomax)

Alighting from the tram near St. Philip’s Church, I turned my back on the town and walked straight to the Promenade. It was a sunny morning, but chilly as an Edinburgh June can be. ... Staring at the great expanse of water, I drew a tremendously deep breath as though by reflex action. ‘The sea! The sea!’ I murmured ecstatically.

(The Silent Traveller in Edinburgh, Chiang Yee)

We entered the spirit world. That, in a basement in Portobello on the East Coast of Scotland, takes some strength of being, when a complete stranger is rattling and chanting over an old Scots body, calling up its animal familiars. Mine arrived at once, punctual as their keeper, or whatever one is to one’s animal familiar. One was a small tiger ... and the other was a whippy and talkative snake.

(What to look for in Winter, Candia McWilliam)

Jules Verne & friends hire bathing cabins and are pondering what to do about bathing suits when ... “The words froze on Jacques’ lips. Through the open cabin door he had just seen a splendid male bather, a British thoroughbred, emerge slowly and gracefully from the water in the most perfect nakedness. To Jonathan’s amazement, other bathers followed, all equally unclad and just as oblivious of the ladies and girls on the shore. The two young men hesitated no longer. They made a dash for the first breaker and dived in ...

“Baldy, 60, Grandpa Buchan still has a great (mainly theoretical) fondness for sex, drugs and live state-of-the-art rock’n’roll! To tell you the honest truth, Tom, I’ve never been so bouncy. Findhorn keeps me up to scratch in all departments and when I get pissed off with it I head for the hills as always.”

(Tom Buchan)

This walk was created by Jim Gilchrist of Pittville Street, himself a noted writer for *The Scotsman*, who unearthed the literary connections mentioned here.

Portobello’s own Book Festival takes place annually, usually in the first weekend in October; details at <http://www.portobellobookfestival.co.uk/>

Edinburgh Libraries have jointly produced an online map indicating books set in Edinburgh; to find it, search the Web for ‘Book Map: Edinburgh novels’.



PORTOBELLO COMMUNITY COUNCIL

