Sir Walter Scott and Abbotsford
Walter Scott timeline

Childhood

Sir Walter Scott was born on 15th August 1771 in Edinburgh to his parents Walter Scott and Anne Rutherford.

Walter Scott's mother Anne (left) and father Walter (right)

Walter Scott was their ninth child, but six of his siblings died in infancy as infant mortality was very high in the 18th and 19th centuries, especially in cities with poor sanitation and disease.

When Scott was 18 months old he contracted polio and was left with a permanent disability in his right leg as a result. Scott’s parents decided to send him to live with his grandparents and aunt at Sandyknowe Farm near Kelso to recover and build up his strength.

Smailholm Tower

Scott learned lots of old stories and tales about the Borders from his grandparents and played around Smailholm Tower – a defensive tower built 300 years before Scott was born during the time of the Reivers.
The Reivers were powerful families who lived on both sides of the Scottish/English border in the 16th century. They often rode over the border to steal cattle from other families, hence their name (reiving means raiding in Scots).

When his grandfather died, Scott returned to his family home in Edinburgh and went to school at the High School and then Edinburgh University.

Sir Walter's career and family life

In 1792 Scott became an Advocate – a lawyer who specialises in pleading for his clients in court.

Scott married Charlotte Carpenter on Christmas Eve in 1797. They were married for 30 years and had four children – Walter, Sophia, Anne and Charles.

Sir Walter’s wife Charlotte and Selkirk Court Room

In 1799 Scott got another job as Sheriff-Depute (judge) of Selkirkshire. His Court Room can still be seen in the centre of Selkirk today and is open for visitors. Scott heard lots of cases and decided whether the person was guilty and if so what their punishment should be. He had the job for 33 years.

Scott lived half the year in the Borders so he could work in Selkirk and lived the other half of the year in Edinburgh so he could continue to be an Advocate. He later became Clerk to the Court of Session in Edinburgh. He had two homes – one in the Borders (a rented house at first and later Abbotsford) and a fashionable townhouse in Castle Street in the New Town in Edinburgh.
Scott’s early work – Border Ballads and Poetry

In his spare time as a young man Scott had begun to write poems, translate stories from German into English and to collect Border Ballads. These are special sung stories from the Borders. They tell tales about supernatural events, ghosts, goblins, battles and hauntings.

Scott gathered his ballads by travelling around the Borders on horseback – he called these trips his ‘raids’ into Liddesdale (land around Hawick), Ettrick and Yarrow (remote valleys near Selkirk).

Scott then wrote five poems based on Scottish history inspired by the ballads – The Lay of the Last Minstrel, Marmion, The Lady of the Lake, Rokeby and The Lord of the Isles.

His poetry was a sensation and he became the most famous British poet of his day and commercially very successful. He was even offered the role of Poet Laureate in 1813, but he turned this down, saying that he couldn’t write poems on demand!

Later, he realised that his poetry was no longer as fashionable as it had been – other younger poets such as Lord Byron were becoming famous and selling more poems than him.

The Waverley Novels

Scott decided that a change of direction was needed and decided to focus on an old manuscript for a novel – this became the world’s first historical novel called Waverley published in 1814.

Scott’s story is set during the Jacobite Rebellion of 1745 and follows the adventures and fortunes of a young Englishman, Edward Waverley as he is swept up in the romance and ultimate tragedy of the rebellion.

When Scott was alive, everyone read poetry – novels didn’t really exist in the way we know them now! Scott invented the historical novel and it was a publishing sensation – no-one had ever written a book that combined real people, places and historical events with magic, the supernatural and imagined adventures. Waverley sold its first edition of 1,000 copies in two days, went on to sell more than all the novels published in 1814 put together and earned Scott ten times as much in its first year as Jane Austen earned for Pride and Prejudice in her entire lifetime!

Scott wrote a further 26 novels in 17 years, with titles based on Scottish history (such as Rob Roy, The Heart of Midlothian and The Antiquary); English history (Ivanhoe and Kenilworth); and international settings such as the Middle East (The Talisman).
Sir Walter Scott discovering his forgotten manuscript in the attic of the old farmhouse at Abbotsford by Charles Martin Hardie (1890)

Scott was the first English-language author to have a truly international career in his lifetime, with many readers in Europe, Australia and North America. The Waverley Novels, as Scott’s novels came to be called, were the first real historical novels and the world’s first bestsellers.

His works were translated into over 30 languages and avidly read from Scandinavia, Italy and Moscow to the American frontier. They were responsible for bringing Scotland to the attention of the whole world, when previously it had been almost unknown.

Despite his fame and fortune, Scott kept his authorship of the Waverley novels a secret until 1827 when it was finally publicly revealed. Scott most likely concealed his authorship of the novels to protect his professional reputation as a poet, to drive sales and because he enjoyed the intrigue and mystery!

The Honours of Scotland and George IV

In 1707, Scotland and England had elected to join together and become the United Kingdom. This was called the Parliamentary Union – many people were worried that this union of the two countries was not going to be a good thing for Scotland. Scott believed that it guaranteed a more prosperous and peaceful life for the Scottish people but he was also worried that Scottish languages, customs, traditions and values were going to be lost.

He was determined to protect and save some aspects of Scottish life such as the Border Ballads which might have been lost if they hadn’t been written down and published. He was also concerned about the Scottish Crown Jewels – the Honours of Scotland. These had
been packed up and almost forgotten about when James VI of Scotland also became King of England in 1603.

In 1818, Scott got permission from the Prince Regent to look in Edinburgh Castle for The Honours of Scotland (the Scottish crown jewels). He and a group of men hunted for the crown jewels in the castle and discovered them in a locked chest. He was awarded his baronetcy (his title ‘Sir’) in 1820 in recognition of his efforts.

Two years later, when the Prince Regent had become king, Scott organised his visit to Edinburgh. George IV was the first British monarch to visit Scotland in over a hundred years and Scott encouraged him to wear tartan. Tartan had been banned after Highlanders were involved in a number of Jacobite rebellions against the crown in the 18th century, but Scott managed to change tartan from a piece of clothing associated with war to a fashionable cloth that everyone wanted to be seen in. It eventually became Scotland’s national dress.

Financial crash, debt and the end of Scott’s life

In 1826 there was a major financial crash and Scott’s publisher and printer became liable for debts amounting to £10 million in today’s terms. Rather than declare himself bankrupt – which he thought was a shameful thing to do – or accept help from friends and family, Scott was very brave and sold off his home in Edinburgh, settled down at Abbotsford and wrote as many books as he could to pay off his debts. declaring “my own right hand shall do it”.

For the remaining years of his life, Scott devoted himself to this self-imposed task day and night and even on Sundays (normally observed at the time as a day of rest and reflection). He wrote a further six novels, a biography of Napoleon Bonaparte and a children’s history of Scotland dedicated to his grandson Johnnie Lockhart.

He also continued to work as Sheriff-Depute and the combination of stress, money worries and grief at the loss of his wife in 1826 all contributed to ill health towards the end of his life. In 1832, Scott was very ill and travelled to Italy on a Royal Navy ship to spend time recuperating. This didn’t work unfortunately and he travelled back to Scotland. He died at Abbotsford aged 61 years old on 21 September 1832.

By the time he died, Scott had paid off half of his debt and the sale of the copyrights of his work paid off the remaining debt. The whole country went into mourning when he died and after his death, money was raised to build the world’s biggest monument to a writer on Princes Street in Edinburgh.
The creation of Abbotsford

In 1811 Scott bought a farm near Galashiels called Cartleyhole. The locals nicknamed it ‘Clartyhole’ which means a dirty, boggy place in Scots!

Scott spent the next 15 years and millions of pounds transforming the little rundown farm into Abbotsford - a huge estate of 1500 acres and an impressive house in the ‘Scots Baronial’ style.

Scott named his estate after a ford over the River Tweed which was said to have been used by monks travelling between the Border abbeys. This ford is still used today during the Braw Lads Gathering in Galashiels when the principals ford the river on horseback.

Scott built Abbotsford as a place of inspiration for research and writing; as a home for his family; a place for entertaining his many guests and displaying his growing collections of books, armour, weapons and artefacts. It was a home fit for a baronet and a laird.

Abbotsford was built in three stages. First, Scott moved into the rundown farmhouse which stood on the site. Next, he built an extension onto the farmhouse in a very different style containing a Dining Room, Armoury and a Conservatory for his wife. He then eventually demolished the farmhouse and built a second extension containing an Entrance Hall, Study, Library and Drawing Room. These are the rooms visitors see today and they have been preserved as they were in Scott’s day almost 200 years ago.

Scott described Abbotsford as a “conundrum castle” meaning a puzzle or mysterious place. Other people have also described it as a “strange jumble”, “a romance in stone and mortar” and “the Waverley Novels in stone”.

Scott collected weapons and armour, 9000 books from around the world, weird and wonderful objects from Scotland, England, Asia and the Far East and used them to decorate his home and inspire his writing. He also collected objects associated with famous people
from history such as William Wallace, Robert the Bruce, Mary, Queen of Scots and Rob Roy.

Later, Sir Walter also described his house as the “Delilah of his imagination”. This refers to the biblical story of Samson and Delilah in which the secret of Samson’s super-human strength is betrayed by Delilah. She allows his hair to be cut off whilst he is sleeping and he loses his strength.

Sir Walter Scott generated a great deal of money through his writing which he invested in the building of Abbotsford – his dream home and place of inspiration. As Abbotsford was built in stages, Scott raised the money required through his writing, but in order to finish the house he went ahead before he had even written his next few novels, trusting that these would also be successful and would generate the money required to pay his debts! Many people looking back at Scott's life think this was a rash decision and left him very financially vulnerable when the financial crash of 1826 took place. This is what Scott means about Abbotsford being the “Delilah of his imagination”.
The exterior of the house
Sir Walter Scott's Study

The Entrance Hall
The Library

The Chinese Drawing Room
The Armoury

The Dining Room
Further reading

University of Edinburgh Walter Scott Digital Archive
http://www.walterscott.lib.ed.ac.uk/index.html

Jacobites
http://www.bbc.co.uk/scotland/education/as/jacobites/

The Scottish Enlightenment
www.educationscotland.gov.uk/scottishenlightenment/index.asp

Other places to visit

Expand your study of Scott’s world with a visit to other sites in the Borders and beyond.

Scottish Borders

Bowhill – discover the Borders home of the Dukes of Buccleuch, the chiefs of the Scott clan. A schools programme and visits are also available.
http://www.bowhillhouse.co.uk/

Melrose Abbey – explore the fascinating ruins which Scott was inspired by and helped to preserve.
https://www.historicenvironment.scot/visit-a-place/places/melrose-abbey/

Smailholm Tower – imagine Scott’s early childhood at this Border peel tower.
www.historic-scotland.gov.uk

Sir Walter Scott’s Court Room, Selkirk – discover Scott’s professional life as Sheriff-Depute for 33 years. A schools programme and visits are also available.
www.scotborders.gov.uk/directory_record/10709/sir_walter_scotts_courtroom

Walter Scott’s Kelso – follow in Scott’s footsteps around the historic town of Kelso.

Edinburgh

The Writers’ Museum
http://www.edinburhmuseums.org.uk/Venues/The-Writers--Museum

The John Murray Archive exhibition at the National Library of Scotland: http://digital.nls.uk/jma/
Scott Monument

The National Museum of Scotland
http://www.nms.ac.uk/national-museum-of-scotland/