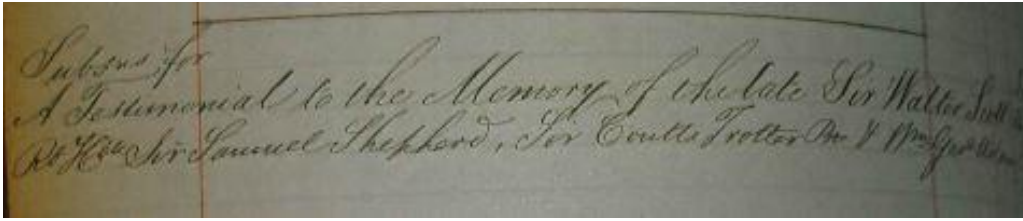


## Manuscript of the Month September 2013

### Subscription account re Sir Walter Scott Testimonial, 1832-33



Abbotsford, the Scottish Borders home of poet and novelist Sir Walter Scott, has recently re-

opened after a two-year restoration programme costing £12M. Its idyllic setting, its unique collections and its intrinsic association with the man and his works, have captivated visitors for nearly two hundred years. But the battle to preserve Abbotsford is as old as the house itself.

Sir Walter Scott was born in Edinburgh in 1771, the son of a lawyer. Although he followed his father into the law, Scott's real loves were literature, history and folklore. He published his first works in the 1790s, but it was a two volume collection of ballads, *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (1802), that made his name. This was followed by several narrative poems, among them *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* (1805), *Marmion* (1808) and the wildly popular *Lady of the Lake* (1810), which brought fame and fortune to Scott and hordes of eager tourists to his native land. And when Scott turned his hand to prose, this too met with resounding success. His first novel, *Waverley* (1814), set during the Jacobite Uprising of 1745, was devoured by critics and readers alike. In a letter to her niece, novelist and future bank customer Jane Austen remarked: *Walter Scott has no business to write novels, especially good ones – It is not fair. He has Fame and Profit enough as a Poet, and should not be taking the bread out of other people's mouths. I do not like him, & do not mean to like Waverley if I can help it – but I fear I must.* (Jane Austen's Letters, ed Deirdre Le Faye, 1995) Fellow novelist and bank customer Maria Edgeworth was equally charmed, informing her aunt: *Waverley was in everybody's hands...I am more delighted with it than I can tell you.* (The Life and Letters of Maria Edgeworth, vol 1, ed AJC Hare, 2007) Over the next 17 years Scott reeled off a further 27 novels. Collectively known as The Waverley Novels, they were among the most popular works of the nineteenth century, with a readership that extended from the banks of the Volga to the prairies of the Mid West.

Despite this unprecedented success, Walter Scott's later years were overshadowed by worry and debt. His writing generated large sums of money, but he had always spent freely: on lavish entertaining, on amassing his huge book and antiquarian collections and, above all, on building and embellishing his cherished Melrose home, Abbotsford. Nestled beside the river Tweed, Abbotsford had been nothing more than a small, dilapidated farm when Scott acquired it in 1811. Over the next fifteen years, however, he transformed it into a turreted, baronial style fantasy – something his literary characters would have felt quite at ease in – and filled it with his treasures. An impressive display of medieval weapons, shields and armour was mounted in the entrance hall under the guidance of bank customer and renowned armoury expert Sir Samuel Rush Meyrick. Architectural mouldings salvaged from old churches and houses were added to the walls and ceilings, while a peerless collection of 9,000 books (among them Richard Colt Hoare's *The Itinerary of Archbishop Baldwin Through Wales...by Giraldus de Barri etc*, 1806) covering everything from topography to witchcraft was arranged in the library alongside an eclectic array of odds and ends: a lock of Bonnie Prince Charlie's hair, Marie Antoinette's clock, Rob Roy's sporran.

To fund his lifestyle, and Abbotsford's ever-spiralling costs, Scott relied on a mixture of loans and advances for as-yet unwritten works. His prolific output, coupled with his indubitable success, meant that for a time credit was easy to come by. But in 1825-26 a stock market crash brought Britain's economy to a shuddering halt. Credit evaporated and loans were called in, bankrupting thousands. At Hoare's, the partners instinctively drew in their horns, as this letter to Lord Kenyon, dated February 1826, shows: *from the alarming State of public Affairs it becomes imperative upon us to refrain from any Advances but those of a temporary Nature & for small Sums; the same Cause which made the Bankers in London call upon your Lordships Neighbours in the Country for the Payment of the money advanced them operates in a great Measure upon all other Bankers in husbanding their Resources more than in the ordinary Course of their Transactions...under present Appearances my Partners hope that you will excuse their advancing the Sum of £10,000.* For Scott, the crash spelt catastrophe. His publishers, Ballantyne & Co, a concern Scott held a considerable stake in, collapsed in early 1826, leaving Scott liable for debts totalling £120,000 (c.£8M today). Instead of declaring himself bankrupt, however, or accepting help from his friends, Scott set about paying off the full amount. He sold his Edinburgh home, pledged any future royalties to his creditors and set about writing more ferociously than ever, churning out several new novels and an assortment of non-fiction works. By the time of his death in September 1832, nearly £70,000 of the £120,000 had been repaid.

Scott's death, hastened by anxiety and his gruelling schedule, was greeted with widespread sorrow. Condolences flooded in from across the world, and tributes hastily arranged. Covent Garden Theatre put on *Waverley* as a five-act play and followed it with a Masque, *The Vision of the Bard*, in which the likes of *Ivanhoe*, *Rob Roy* and the *Lady of the Lake* rubbed shoulders with *Jeanie Deans* and *Dandie Dinmont*. Not to be outdone, Drury Lane Theatre announced a performance of *Macbeth: After which will be exhibited – Scene 1 A View of Abbotsford...painted expressly by Mr Stanfield, to which celebrated place will be introduced, in Commemoration of Scotland's Immortal Bard, a Pilgrimage of the Principal Dramatic Characters his genius has created...Scene 2 The Poet's Study at Abbotsford, exhibiting an arrangement of the Characters round his Bust and vacant Chair, concluding with a Grand Scenic Apotheosis of the Minstrel of the North.* (The Morning Chronicle, 2 Nov 1832) Weippert's Abbotsford House Quadrilles, meanwhile, featured prominently at dances up and down the country throughout that winter.

Plans for more permanent memorials were underway within weeks of Scott's death. A subscription launched at Melrose aimed to erect a statue on top of the nearby Eildon Hills. Others at Aberdeen and Edinburgh funded the Scott Monument, which towers over Edinburgh's Princes Street Garden and Waverley Station to this day. South of the border, meanwhile, Scott's admirers were equally anxious to commemorate his life and work. During a meeting at Bridgewater House, London, on 9 November, hosted by Lord Francis Leveson Gower, a gathering of about fifty gentlemen agreed that a subscription be raised *for the purposes of testifying the public respect and admiration for Sir Walter Scott and, That...the most appropriate mode of affecting that purpose will be, to perpetuate in the line of Sir Walter Scott's descendants the Estate and Mansion of Abbotsford, with its Literary and Antiquarian Collections – objects identified with his illustrious Works.* (The Aberdeen Journal, 12 Dec 1832) A Committee was duly formed to oversee the subscription and a vast network of Sub-Committees sprang to life in locations as far apart as Yorkshire and Nova Scotia.

Within weeks of the Bridgewater House meeting, subscription accounts had been opened at all the leading London and country banks. That at Hoare's, entitled 'Subscription for a Testimonial to the Memory of the late Sir Walter Scott', was opened on 24 November 1832 with donations by partner Henry Merrik Hoare (£20) and the Earl of Pembroke (£50). Other subscribers listed in the Hoare's account included the Duke of Northumberland (£100), the Dowager Marchioness of Lothian (£5),

historian Henry Hallam (£10) and the Provost of King's College Cambridge (£10). The Committee's aim, however, was to encourage as many people as possible to contribute, since: *the real tribute consisted in the number of subscribers rather than the sums individually subscribed; and that, as his immortal works are read by all classes, the least affluent should be afforded the opportunity of expressing their feelings.* (The Morning Post, 14 Nov 1832) To this end, reams of ruled paper were sent to libraries and booksellers across the country to record subscribers' names, on the understanding that once the subscription was closed these papers would be bound into volumes and placed in the library at Abbotsford in perpetuity. And as a further incentive, the Committee announced that the name of each subscriber would be published in the newspapers.

So great was Scott's popularity that the Committee felt certain of success. And at first subscriptions came in thick and fast. Early subscribers included fellow poets William Wordsworth and Robert Southey (£3-3-0 apiece), politician Sir Robert Peel (£50), artists David Wilkie (£10) and Francis Chantrey (£25) and the Oxford Union Debating Society (£50). William IV gave £300, the Queen of Spain £20, wealthy Russian Count Demidoff £100. And, as anticipated, there were countless subscriptions from the less well known or well off, among them 'A Spinster's Mite, Tiverton' (10s); 'The eleven Newmans of Henley, Children, one shilling each' (11s); 'The Domestics of Sir William H Williamson Bt MP' (10/6d); 'A Tribute to the Memory of innate Rectitude released by Law, but obeying the dictates of Justice' (£5-5-0) and 'Ivanhoe' (£1-1-0).

It soon became clear, however, that the Committee's optimism had been misplaced. By April 1833 just £7,000 of the £17,000 required had been forthcoming. Undeterred, the Committee redoubled its efforts. During a Great Meeting at the Mansion House the following month, the first subscribers' event to which ladies were invited, the Lord Mayor made an impassioned plea in support of: *the genius of the departed Minstrel of the North, the once eloquent chords of whose lyre are now silent forever...Who amongst them, he urged, had not visited the tombs of Smollett, of Burns, of Gibbon, and of Shakespeare? Who of them had not...endeavoured to see the house where the immortal Shakespeare dwelt?...Sir Walter Scott was our second Shakespeare, and it now became our duty to sanctify to his memory that romantic dwelling which he loved when living, which was hallowed as the scene of the bright inspirations of his genius, and which was so appropriately calculated to awaken in future generations a just remembrance of his talent and his worth.* (The Morning Chronicle, 20 May 1833) Other speakers, including the Bishop of Exeter and Henry Merrik Hoare's nephew, Sir Thomas Dyke Acland Bt, agreed with these sentiments but also emphasised Scott's refusal to evade his creditors and his efforts to pay off every penny of his debts, examples of moral uprightness and integrity that they believed should be recognised and applauded.

Despite this renewed effort, the Abbotsford Subscription never reached its projected target. The account at Hoare's was dormant from May 1833, having raised just £313-17-0 (c.£24K today). And once various expenses had been deducted, the overall total stood at £7,200, although Scott's son-in-law and biographer John Lockhart later claimed that a young secretary had absconded to America with an additional £3,000. In July 1836, this £7,200 was made over to trustees, who put £5,600 towards securing the library and antiquarian collections and the remainder into reducing a £10,000 heritable bond that had loomed over Abbotsford since 1825.

Scott's £120,000 debt was finally paid off in 1847, thanks in part to a new edition of the Waverley Novels. By then Abbotsford was a firm fixture on the tourist trail, having being opened to the public within months of Scott's death. In 2007, responsibility for the house and its collections passed from Scott's descendants to the newly formed Abbotsford Trust, thus beginning a new chapter for what one 1830s subscriber called 'this romance in architecture'.