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Wild for Scotland Podcast

Episode 85: 'Sleep Came Early' - Cherry Blossom in Helensburgh (April)

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[pre-roll ads]

[main theme tune]

Hello there and welcome to Wild for Scotland,

a podcast full of immersive travel stories from Scotland.

I'm your host and storyteller-in-chief, Kathi Kamleitner.

Wild for Scotland helps you connect with Scotland

Its people, wildlife landscapes and histories.

In every episode, I either whisk you away on a beautiful adventure,

Or introduce you to inspiring locals and their stories.

In between, I share my top tips for your own Scotland trip,

And how to follow in my footsteps.

So, lean back and enjoy -

Let's travel to Scotland!

[main theme tune end]

In Austria, we have a saying that goes like this: "April, April, der macht was er will."

It means, that the weather in April is highly unreliable. It follows no rules and there is a constant back and forth between rain and sunshine.

Sounds a bit like Scotland to me, only that we have this kind of weather all year round!

So what can be said about April in Scotland?

In Scottish mythology, April is the time when the Cailleach prepares for her long summer slumber. The Cailleach is a powerful woman, an ancient deity, who created the mountains

and valleys of the Scottish land. She used her hammer to split and collect the rocks, but when her basket was full, they tumbled out, forming hills and mountains in her trail.

Every year, in autumn time, she comes to the shore of the west coast, and washes her plaid in the sea. She tumbles it round and scrubs it hard, creating a whirlpool, we call Corryvreckan. Once it's clean, she drapes her plaid onto the mountains around, covering them softly in a thick blanket of snow. She is the mother of gods, a force of nature, and the creator of seasons.

But come April, the Cailleach gets weary and tired, and eventually she falls asleep and turns into stone. That is what we celebrate on the 30th of April for Beltane. What follows is the time of Brigid [BREE-id], the goddess of Springtime, healing and fertility.

It's the time when Spring really arrives. Not the Fool's Spring we had last month - but real, actual Spring. The snowdrops and daffodils make way for bluebells and cherry blossoms. Lambs are born on the hills and Highland coos welcome new life into the world. Slowly but surely, the landscape turns greener and trees are growing fresh leaves. The days are getting longer, and the sun throws warm rays of light onto the world.

Thinking about April takes me back to a trip, I did a few years ago, when my parents were visiting.

We spent long afternoons taking care of my garden, planting seedlings and cleaning up raised beds. But we also took the time for a day trip to the coast.

In today's story, I'm taking you to Helensburgh on the northern side of the Firth of Clyde. We'll dive deep into this town's peculiar history and learn why it's such a great place to visit in Springtime. I'll take you to one of my favourite historic houses, and we'll jump on a boat to make the most of a sunny April day.

This is 'Sleep Came Early'.

[jingle]

[soundscape: being on a train]

When you're on a train, you can watch the world fly by.

From my seat, I see the calm waters of the River Clyde. The train tracks run so close to the riverbank, that it looks like we're flying over the mirror-like surface, at least when it is high tide. Out here, the river is so wide and deep, that it's guided by the tides. Twice a day, the receding water reveals the remains of old piers, and shipwrecks rusting away in sheltered bays. I've seen them many times, for these train tracks are the beginning of a long and scenic journey into the Heart of the Highlands.

But that is not where I'm heading today.

[soundscape: train doors open, getting off, street noise and people noise added]

I get off at Helensburgh Central, a small and unassuming station. Outside, traffic is flying past on a busy road, and I see people flocking towards the promenade.

In the early 19th century, Helensburgh became a popular seaside resort. Many Glaswegians, who were tired of their cramped quarters and polluted air in the city, spent their summer holidays here, but back in those days, it was difficult to reach. Enter Henry Bell, a local hotel owner and engineer. He commissioned a paddle steamer named *Comet*, which would bring guests from Glasgow to Helensburgh with speed and comfort. It was the first commercial steamship in Europe and brought prosperity to this little seaside town.

But the population grew rapidly, and just a few decades later, a railway was built and Helensburgh became even easier to reach.

From the station, it's not far to Colquhoun Square, which is named after the man who built this town. Colquhoun might just be the only word I know with a silent qu, so don't be surprised, when you see it written on a street sign.

Sir James Colquhoun, the chief of the Clan Colquhoun of Luss, bought this piece of land on banks of the River Clyde back in 1752. He wanted to create a town of craftspeople from Glasgow, so he placed an advertisement in a local newspaper, calling all bonnet makers, stocking, linen and woollen weavers to flock to the seaside.

The only problem was, Helensburgh did not lend itself to the flourishing textile industry of Glasgow. The roads were at best existing, the shore was too shallow to for shipping transfers, and the area did not have enough fresh water to support the industries he wanted to attract. His ad remained largely unanswered.

Instead, he parcelled out the land and sold it to wealthy merchants from the city, looking for the perfect seaside retreat to escape the dreary city life. He named the town after his wife, Lady Helen Sutherland, and they watched as their new residents built stately homes and grand villas, along a grid-like system for avenues and roads.

Today, this grid-like layout remains. I wander up the wide streets, named after Kings and Queens, Lords and Ladies. Each of them is lined by rows of trees and fresh green grass, trimmed to perfection.

These are the famous cherry trees of Helensburgh. With every corner I take, I come across a different type of cherry tree. They were each hand-picked to bloom at different times of Spring. Some trees are carrying heavy blossoms, white and pink, lifting their frilly heads towards the sun above. Others are already fading, their falling petals raining softly onto the grass and concrete below. Yet others are still at the cusp of awakening, waiting patiently for their turn to shine.

Together, almost 2,000 trees ring in Springtime in Helensburgh. They are cared for by the Helensburgh Tree Conservation Trust, who publish a map with approximate timings of the bloom and make sure that old trees are replaced.

With the map on my phone, I follow the streets, chasing pink and white blossoms, contrasting against the bright blue sky.

I'm doing Hanami, the Japanese custom of flower viewing. But Hanami is by far not the only Japanese influence we can see in Helensburgh today.

[soundscape: walking/footsteps]

As I climb the tree-lined streets, I eventually reach the other train station in town. I cross over and follow the signs for Hill House, arguably the most famous building here in Helensburgh, and one of my favourite grand homes to visit.

Hill House was built for Walter Blackie, a successful publisher who lived here with his wife Anna and their five children. That in itself, is nothing remarkable - as I've already told you, Helensburgh became a popular seaside escape for many wealthy families, who wanted to get away from the city.

What's so special about this house is who Blackie commissioned to build it: a man named Charles Rennie Mackintosh. Not Macintosh as the apple or the computer, but Mackintosh, the designer and architect from Glasgow.

Together with his wife, Margaret Macdonald Mackintosh and a few others, he shaped the Glasgow Style, a predecessor of the Vienna Secession, the French Art Nouveau and the German Jugendstil. It grew out of the British Arts & Crafts movement, blending highly skilled trades with simplicity and functionality.

The movement began at the height of the Glaswegian ship building industry, when people from all over the world were always coming and going, and bringing with them ideas and inspiration from far-away lands like Japan.

Artists like Mackintosh were highly influenced by these ideas, and mixed Japanese philosophies with their own vision of modern design. But unlike their European counterparts, the members of the Glasgow Style were waiting in vain for British society to catch up with their progressive ideas. Mackintosh only received a few commissions in Glasgow and beyond, he never lived to see his big architectural breakthrough.

It is therefore even more special to have a building like Hill House open for visitors today. It is widely considered one of Mackintosh's masterpieces, a perfect blend of a practical and livable family space, and beautiful, simplistic design.

I enter the house through the old front entrance. The door is heavy, and as I open it, light floods into a dark wood-panelled hallway. The floor is covered in a soft carpet and straight lines guide my view towards the far end of the hallway, while wooden armchairs and metal ceiling lights pick up the graphic pattern of the carpet. Large windows let in light and dark wooden beams create a warm and cosy atmosphere.

Immediately to my right lies Blackie's library. A small desk faces large, leaded windows and the walls are lined with tall shelves, filled with colourfully bound books. It's as if Mackintosh wanted to make sure that Blackie had a space to work, but the space feels separate from the rest of the house. Once you've walked past it, lies Blackie's family life.

At the front of the house, the family would have gathered in the spacious drawing room. A piano in one corner, a generous bench along a long row of windows, and a seating area with Mackintosh's characteristic furniture. Low seats with unusually high backs. Margaret Macdonald's floral designs add a soft touch to the space and the white walls bounce the light streaming in from outside.

And so I walk from room to room. A cosy wood-panelled dining room, an open staircase with colourful stained-glass windows, a vaulted bedroom with delicate stencils and colourful wall hangings, and playful children's bedrooms with simple bookshelves, just wide enough to fit one book each.

I tour the servants' quarters, kitchens and stores. There is even a Victorian bathroom, complete with a freestanding tub and a rainfall shower.

Every room is enhanced by Mackintosh and Macdonald's brilliant designs, love for functionality, and eye for artistic detail. Hill House is not just a home, it's a work of art - one that you could live in.

Unfortunately, Mackintosh made a grave mistake. Always on the cutting edge of design, he experimented with new materials and chose a plaster, that didn't allow the building to breathe. Helensburgh sits on the west coast of Scotland, where it rains on 193 days of the year. Battered by rain, the building soaks up a lot of water, but unfortunately, all that moisture has nowhere to go.

Since building began in 1902, the walls of Hill House have slowly begun to dissolve 'like a tablet of aspirin in a glass of water'.

In order to save it, the National Trust of Scotland, who owns the house today, has embarked on an experimental journey of its own.

In 2019, they built a porous box around the entire house. The structure is made from steel mesh, which allows air to flow freely, while rain is kept out almost entirely. The goal is to give the house a chance to dry out, and hopefully one day, to be restored.

But the box also gives visitors a new way to engage with the building and see it like never before.

[soundscape: door opening, walking on gravel, then walking on hard surface]

I step outside through a backdoor and walk across an open courtyard towards a set of metal stairs. I climb up, one floor, then two, more and more steps, until I reach a gangway, that is higher than the house itself. I bring myself to look down as I walk along it, and across the roof.

Hill House doesn't look small from this perspective - for that, you'd have to climb even higher. But it does look different. More fragile and unsure of itself. Parts of the plaster have flaked off and reveal the pink stones that make up the walls.

The plan is to replace the render on the walls, once the building has fully dried out, and then remove the box to allow the building to stand proud on its own once again.

I'm walking now, along the front of the box. The sun is shining in, casting a soft light on my face through the steel mesh. From here, I get a good view across the surrounding buildings and trees. The box allows me to stand taller than all of them. In the distance, beyond the houses, I can see the River Clyde, Greenock and Rosneath on the other shores and further out - the sea. I'm not sure what I think about this viewpoint in the box disappearing so soon.

The Hill House Box is without a doubt just as radical and beautiful as Hill House itself.

Back in the town centre, I board a bus to the small village of Rhu, just along the coastal road, leaving Helensburgh to the west. I get off near the marina and walk over to a small cabin to check-in. I've booked a boat trip out into the Firth of Clyde, to see another icon of Helensburgh.

[soundscape: boat noise, some seagulls]

The river is sparkling in the sunshine as the boat leaves the marina and heads out to sea. The water is a mixture of green and blue, depending on how the light bounces off it. It's warm enough to stand out on the open deck at the back of the boat and watch the village of Rhu get smaller in the distance.

Our skipper heads south and sets course for the middle of the firth. There are no visible islands out here, but below the surface, the fast-flowing waters of the sea and the river are cooking up a storm. Buoys mark the most treacherous places, where invisible sandbanks threaten to run ships aground. And the fact that this is necessary, is made clear by our next stop.

I spot a black structure on the horizon, peaking out from the water. As we come closer, I realise that it's a ship wreck, turned on its side. The *MV Captayannis* was a Greek transport vessel that ran aground here during a big storm in 1974. When the captain realised how fast the water was flowing in, he stranded the ship on a sandbank and evacuated with his crew. The cargo holds were filled with sugar, meant for the docks of Greenock, but as you can imagine, all of that precious cargo was lost at sea.

All that remained, is the nickname locals have given to the wreck: The Sugar Boat.

Since no one ever claimed ownership of the boat, there was no one to foot the bill of removing it. Over the years, the wreck has been looted for parts, and wildlife has moved in, using the ship like an artificial reef in the middle of the open bay.

[soundscape: boat noise, boat stops, seaside ambience]

We sail on, but it doesn't take long for our skipper to slow down again. Gannets are divebombing into the water, not far from us.

We hover for a while and watch the birds shoot down at incredible speed, and emerge again, presumably a fish less in the sea. There is even a pod of resident dolphins here in the bay, truly reminding me, that this is where the river meets the sea, and the boundaries of freshwater and salt water are blurred.

At last, we reach the waterfront of Helensburgh. I try to spot Hill House up above the town, but from this angle, it's difficult to make out the box. Instead, I see children running along the promenade, their parents a few steps behind juggling strollers and cones of ice cream. But despite this heightened sense of activity on this sunny day, I wonder what it would have looked like in Henry Bell's days. When the steamship dropped off weary city-dwellers and turned them into holiday-makers.

When I think of the cherry blossoms lining the streets of Helensburgh, the warm sunshine on my nose as I looked out from the Hill House Box, and the gannets flying with us here at sea, it's as if for the Cailleach, the goddess of winter, sleep came early this year.

[jingle]

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I hope you enjoyed this springtime journey to Helensburgh and the waters of the Firth of Clyde.

Helensburgh is one of my favourite day trips from Glasgow, although it's of course worth to stay overnight and spend a few days in the wider area. It's really easy to get here by train and continue by train or by bus to other villages on the waterfront, over to Loch Lomond or up to the Arrochar Alps. it makes for a great homebase for a few days off the beaten path.

Which brings me to the practical part of the show. Here are five travel tips for a trip to Helensburgh and the surrounding area.

Tip number 1) Explore on foot

Helensburgh is actually crossed by two of Scotland's popular long distance hikes.

The first one is the John Muir Way. It begins here in Helensburgh and leads primarily along rivers and canals to Dunbar on the east coast, where John Muir was born.

The second trail is the Three Lochs Way. It begins in Balloch on Loch Lomond, loops down through Helensburgh and continues along the shores of Gare Loch and Loch Long. It can be walked in 3 to 4 days and all sections are well connected with Helensburgh by public transport.

Tip number 2) Stay at Balmillig B&B

A few years ago, I had the pleasure of staying with John and Anne Urquhart at Balmillig B&B. They own a beautiful house on one of the cherry tree-lined streets in the heart of Helensburgh. Guests have access to a beautiful sunroom which is kept cosy at night with a fire. There is even a hot tub in the garden.

And you'll need it! John is a qualified hiking guide and can take you on easy or challenging walks in the wider Helensburgh and Lomond area.

Tip number 3) Bag the peaks of the Arrochar Alps

The Arrochar Alps are one of the southernmost mountain ranges in the Highlands. The most famous peak here is Ben Arthur, but most people know it by its nickname, The Cobbler.

Just short of being a Munro itself, it's surrounded by two peaks over 3,000 feet, making this the perfect opportunity to bag two Munros in one go. Since the car park in Arrochar can be quite pricey, it's not a bad idea to stay in Helensburgh and reach this trail by train or by bus.

Tip number 4) Check out the Destination Helensburgh Shop on Sinclair Street

Destination Helensburgh is a volunteer-run effort to promote everything Helensburgh has to offer for day trippers and tourists. Their wee shop on Sinclair Street is a great source for information, but they also stock a nice selection of Scottish crafts and gifts. Last time, I was there, I came away with ideas for my next day trip to the area, and a poster print of one of the old ads for the steamship journey.

Tip number 5) Have a meal on the waterfront

When I asked my partner about his favourite thing about our trip to Helensburgh, he said: the tapas.

So I dedicate this tip to him. To be fair, the tapas at La Barca on the waterfront were truly delicious. Such a treat after a long day of exploring. Nearby, you'll also find great fish & chips, seafood, pizzas and a French wine bar, all within a short walk from one another.

Head to the full shownotes on our website for a summary of these travel tips and a link to my Helensburgh and Lomond travel guide, including even more ideas for things to do, and places to eat, here on the Firth of Clyde.

{SOUND: main theme tune}

And with this, I send you off to dream about your own trip to Helensburgh to see the cheery blossom. If you're really quick, you'll be able to catch some of the May-flowering trees over the next few weeks.

I will be back next month with a new story to continue our journey through A Year in Scotland.

If you'd like to hear more practical travel tips for Scotland and a few ideas for where to go off the beaten path, head over to my YouTube channel, which I've recently re-launched and plan to publish lots of hands-on travel advice for Scotland.

In the meantime, remember that if you enjoyed this episode, I'd be so grateful if you could share the link with a friend, or take a screenshot of your podcast app right now and post about it on social media.

Thank you so much for listening today.

Wild for Scotland is written and hosted by me, Kathi Kamleitner. Fran Turauskis is the co-producer, editor and sound designer of the show. Podcast art is by Lizzie Vaughan-Knight and all original music is composed by Bruce Wallace.

Until next time when we experience a different month in Scotland.