

Burns Supper

Even before his death, poet Robert Burns' cottage at Alloway, Ayrshire, had been sold to the incorporation, or guild, of shoemakers of Ayr, one of whose members turned it into an alehouse. It was here, on 29 January 1801 (they got his birthday wrong) that soldiers of the Argyll Fencibles (militia) met to hear their band play – and to use the services of his cottage in its new role.

The first recorded Burns Supper took place at Alloway in the same year, but on the anniversary of his death (21st July). It involved a speech and multiple toasts; to eat there was haggis (which was addressed) and, a mercifully lost tradition, sheep's head; given the social status of those present, refreshment was probably wine and ale rather than whisky. Present were nine friends and patrons of Burns. Among them was a lady, though thereafter the Suppers were mostly (sometimes militantly) all-male affairs until far into the twentieth century: a curious slant on Burns' own life as well as on the first dinner. The 'toast to the lasses' was traditionally thanks for the cooking and an appreciation of the women in Burns' life, only later degenerating into a sexist (often misogynistic) rant.

Celebrations were held twice yearly until 1809 when participants settled on January (25th), because this fell in a slack period of the agricultural year. Commercialisation of his birthplace did little to honour the memory of his life and work, and in 1822 the poet John Keats complained bitterly of how both the ambience and the landlord of the Alloway inn degraded Burns' greatness.