

History of Burns Clubs

Burns clubs are societies devoted to the life and work of Robert Burns. The earliest meeting of devotees of Burns took place in the summer of 1801, only five years after the poet's death. Nine gentlemen of Ayr, friends and admirers of Burns, held a dinner in the poet's birthplace (then a tavern). Haggis formed a part of the fare and Burns's Address to a Haggis was recited. The Revd Hamilton Paul delivered the toast to the 'Immortal Memory' of Burns in verses of his own composition. Thus was established the essential form of the Burns supper. Before breaking up, the company resolved to celebrate the birthday of Burns the following January. Out of these informal gatherings the Alloway Club developed, later dinners being held at the King's Arms, Ayr, in midsummer. This early club ceased to exist in 1819 and was not revived until 1908.

The Greenock Burns Club owed its genesis to a much older body called the Greenock Ayrshire Society, which appears to have held Burns suppers from 1802 and by 1811 had metamorphosed into the Greenock Burns Club. Greenock have had a continuous existence down to the present day, whereas the rival Paisley Burns Club (1805) was in abeyance from 1836 till 1874.

The Kilmarnock Burns Club first met at the Angel Inn (formerly Begbie's Tavern) in January 1808, but was dormant from 1814 to 1841. The Dunfermline United Burns Club (1812) likewise had a lengthy period of suspended animation, being revived in 1870. Though a relative latecomer, the Dumfries Burns Club (1820) has flourished ever since its foundation. It arose out of the campaign (1813–19) to erect a mausoleum over the poet's grave.

By 1810 Burns suppers were being held on an ad hoc basis in many parts of the country. The first in England was held at Oxford in 1806 and Burns Night celebrations were taking place in London by 1810. The idea spread to India in 1812, and thereafter to Canada, the USA and the Australian colonies. The Burns movement received enormous stimulus from the celebrations of the centenary of the poet's birth in January 1859; out of the many hundreds of dinners and concerts around the world developed some of the oldest clubs in existence today. Nothing was done to bring them together until February 1885, when Burnsians met in London for the unveiling of the monument in the Thames Embankment Gardens. A meeting in Kilmarnock on 17 July formally instituted the Burns Federation, with its international headquarters in the town where the poet's works first saw the light of day in printed form.

In its inaugural year the Federation had ten members: eight clubs in Scotland and two in England. A further 23 joined in 1886, including ten in Scotland, six in England, one in Ireland, two each in Australia and the USA, and one each in Canada and New Zealand. Progress was slow in the early years, but the launch of the Burns Chronicle in September 1891 gave the Federation fresh impetus and in the run-up to the centenary of the poet's death in 1896 it grew dramatically.

By 1925 the number of affiliated clubs had grown to 350, at which level it has remained remarkably constant ever since, although many of the older clubs have disappeared and new ones continually take their place. Annual conferences were confined to Kilmarnock until 1894 when Glasgow was the venue. In 1907 it went south of the Border for the first time, to Sunderland. By the 1930s, the custom of holding the conference alternately in Scotland and England was well established. Since 1978, when London, Ontario, was the venue, the conference has taken place in Canada or the USA on several occasions. The current number of members affiliated to active clubs worldwide is estimated at 80,000.