

The dazzling new Robert Burns Birthplace Museum, with its interactive displays and boldly creative approach, offers an entirely fresh encounter with the Bard. *Marian Pallister* was there on the first day

Have you met Robert Burns?





PHOTOGRAPHS: PAUL GRAHAM

IT WAS THE DAY Glasgow announced at 8am that its schools would close because of severe weather. It was the day the Forth Road Bridge was closed by snow for the first time in its 46-year history. It was a day of traffic chaos on roads around Scotland, including the M77 that leads from Glasgow to Alloway, where the Robert Burns Birthplace Museum was due to open its doors to the public for the first time.

On 1 December 2010, police advised motorists to stay at home, but Wilma Traill is made of sterner stuff than most. She got on to her blue disability buggy in Ayr and navigated the four and a half miles through the snow to be the museum's first visitor.

As she proudly drove the buggy through the entrance to this unique collection, she said: "I've had MS for a long time, but MS is not an excuse for not doing things. And I wanted to be the first through these doors."

Negotiating her way past the Bard's desk and chair, she was stopped in her tracks by a video performance of *Tam o' Shanter*, the first of a plethora of exciting encounters the new museum offers.

Later, when Wilma had carried out her personal

"consumer test" of this National Trust for Scotland-led venture, she put the video performances at the top of her list of favourites and agreed with the expectation of experts that this will become one of Scotland's leading attractions.

Wilma is a bit of a museum expert, and was completely at ease with the museum's "show not tell" ethos. The interactive displays in the Birthplace Museum delighted her, and she soon engaged initially reluctant strangers in an electronic Burns Supper game.

The sense of fun and engagement that interpretation project manager Mary Stones was hoping for when she and the Birthplace Museum team designed the exhibition space was certainly in evidence as Wilma made her way around the exhibits. Nor was she deterred by the few interactive presentations that aren't quite disability-friendly. Able-bodied visitors can sit on the cutty stool (the naughty step of Burns's day) to activate an 18th-century "meenister's rant" from the pulpit about sin and the road to perdition. Wilma leaned out of her buggy and banged the stool.

"All the interactive exhibits are absolutely brilliant," she said. "I've never seen a museum with ▶

Molly Bilsland, left, takes a close look at Peter Howson's portrait of the Bard. Above: artworks add to the pleasure of the museum

► so many and there's something for all ages. Everything is spaced so well and it's suited to the disabled. This is fantastic. I could spend all day here."

Museum director Nat Edwards was delighted by Wilma's reactions, but was not surprised by the comments of other visitors who felt there should be more instructions to give access to the interactive exhibits.

One exhibit comprises a series of small doors concealed in a wall. Behind each door is an artefact that once belonged to the Bard – some beautiful buttons are perhaps the most emotively personal – but one man said he would never have discovered these if another visitor hadn't boldly seized a handle.

Nat Edwards said: "Older people were trained not to touch and to be quiet. Now museums are a place of discovery." For some visitors, inhibitions may have to be shed.

In their efforts to promote the "show not tell" ethos, Nat and Mary resisted instruction boards, but Nat promised on the opening day that, as with all aspects of the display, visitor reaction would be monitored and responded to.

Most visitors, however, were only too happy with the interactivity, some giving a running update on their progress. "It would be better if the electronic facsimile of the Kilmarnock Edition gave you the option of going straight to your favourite poem" turned in minutes into a delighted "Oh – it does give you that option. Look – this is how you get the poem you want."

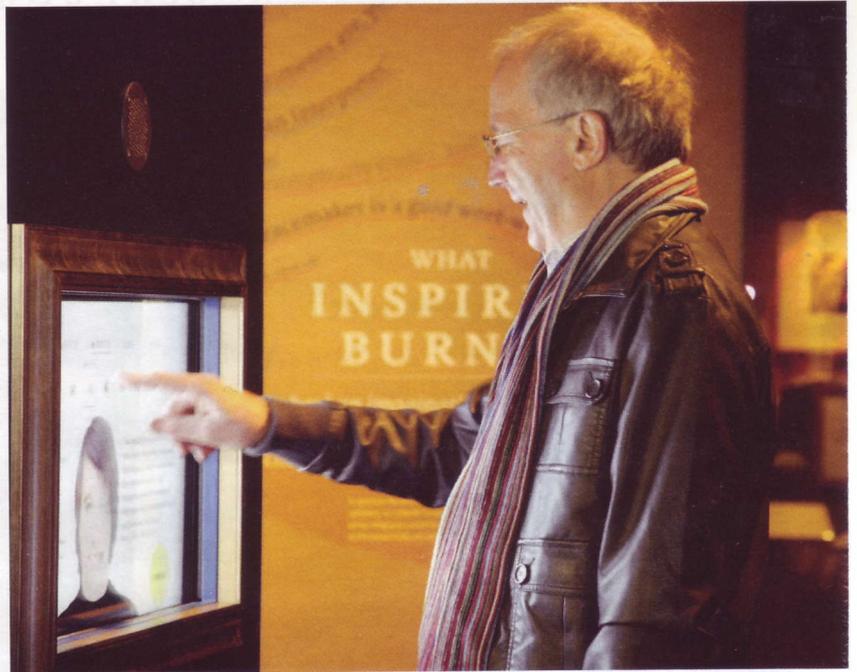
A place of discovery indeed – and visitors may uncover technological skills they didn't imagine they had as they explore the many possibilities.

But this is an exhibition on many levels, and while the interactivity may be a helpful and stimulating way to view the many Burns treasures now gathered under one roof, serious scholarship is also evident.

Mary Stones's intention has been to stimulate consideration of every facet of the bard – the facts, the myths and the opinions. The entrance to the exhibition underscores this with written and audio descriptions of Burns: farmer, freemason, parent, poet, patriot, exciseman, husband...

The aim is to appeal both to the Burns scholars and to those who know only the myths and the legends. This is a broad spectrum, but the thematic rather than chronological approach means that visitors can engage at any level they choose.

As property manager Caroline Glenn said: "I think



the museum itself has a very different approach and the building takes away from the old couthy image and prepares visitors for a new experience. This is not a series of little glass cases that can be seen in half an hour."

Brian Woods was one of the first-day visitors who planned to spend a lot of time at the exhibition. Here was a man whose delight at the result of so many years of campaigning, planning and creating was tangible. He said: "As a former secretary of the

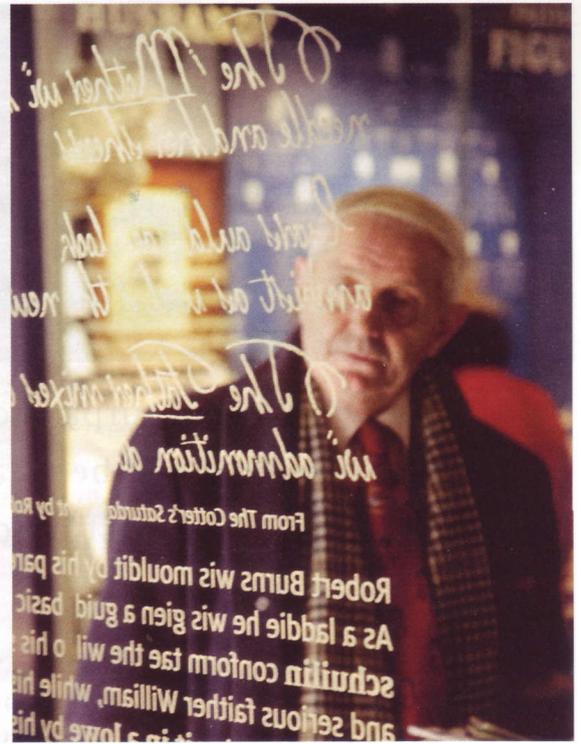
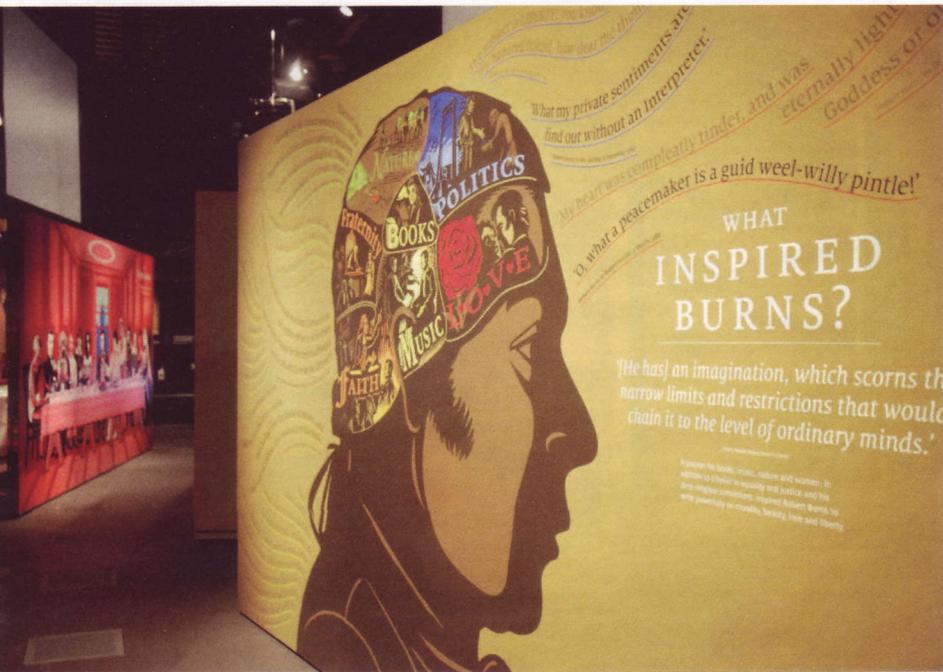
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local community council, I'm delighted to see the museum finished. It has surpassed my expectations and it will be an asset to the local community and all of Scotland. Burns is displayed and represented in an innovative manner that will delight Burns aficionados and tourists alike."

The thematic approach covers aspects such as identity, inspiration, and fame: who was this man really? What inspired him? What fame accrued to him during his lifetime – and how has fame subsequently served to exalt him, demonise him and commoditise him?

Adjacent to the collection is a temporary exhibition space where Peter Howson's powerful images of Burns overawed one-year-old Molly Bilsland. Her mother, Allison Cooper, had one word for the new museum: "Beautiful".

Back in the main exhibition area, the voices of



The new museum is highly interactive, to the delight of one first-day visitor, Wilma Traill, pictured far right



actors Brian Cox and Bill Paterson and singer Eddi Reader are among those reading or singing Burns's work. You will also hear Sheona Campbell, a local aficionado invited by museum curator David Hopes to record *The Cottars' Saturday Night*.

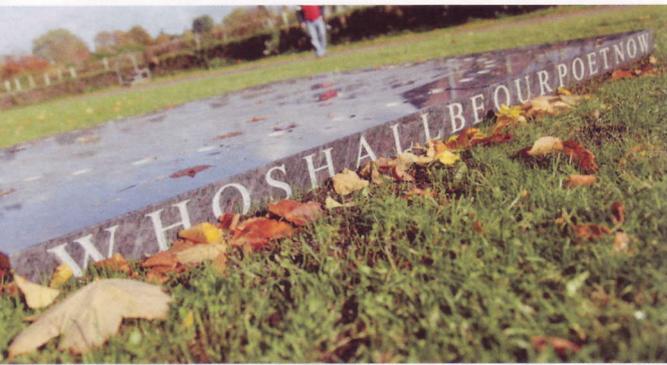
Sheona was there on the first day with friends from the Alloway Burns Club – all of them Trust volunteers and guides at Culzean. She said she was honoured to be part of the museum's interpretation of the Bard. "We were brought up on Burns's poetry," she said. "As an Ayrshire lass I entered all the festivals. Today children's education is missing out on Burns. Now that we have the museum, there's no excuse not to know about him and more of his work." She was convinced visitors could learn something new about the Bard with each visit.

Alison Stewart, also Ayrshire born and bred,

confessed: "It's better than I thought it would be. It mixes the old with the new and it's especially good for the children." Fellow Alloway Burns Club member Liz Chalice declared: "I'm delighted to be here on the first day. It was absolutely worth it. They've done it so well – the desk, chair and plough are a great introduction. I feel you can soak it in through the pores."

For the Ayrshire folk, the museum is not simply the splendid display of a very important collection. As Myra McLanaghan said: "I think this is going to be good for the area and good for the country." Her friend Ann Hamilton, another Burns enthusiast, added: "It gives a different view of Burns – this is a beautiful exhibition."

In the glass-walled cafe, its windows etched with Scots words, which are also suspended from the



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► vaulted wood ceiling, Caroline Glenn said: "We want people to learn about his work but also about Burns as a person – to shed light on why he wrote as he did. There are some tourists who don't know who he is. I want them to find out more. I want them to spend the day here, to walk around the garden, go into the cottage, to enjoy the museum experience."

When Mary Stones was planning the exhibition, she wanted people to have ownership of Burns at a level they themselves would choose. She hoped the screens, which spring to life every hour on the hour, with their audio performances of the poems and songs, would "break down the barrier of language".

James Robertson, the novelist and founder of Scots language publisher Itchy Co, created a Scots glossary for the exhibition, and each exhibit in the more conventional displays involves an element of Scots to "tell", while the "show" exhibits help visitors to absorb the Scots language almost by osmosis.

Most first-day visitors vowed to repeat the experience. David Willett, from Tarbolton, a past member of the Alloway Burns Council, said: "It's good to see all the artefacts together. I like the concept of getting the children involved and I like the interactive displays."

Eleanor Scobie, from Kirkmichael in Ayrshire, found it "a bit dark for reading some of the notices" but she added: "I'm very impressed by the general layout." Her husband Brian, who learned his first Burns at the age of seven, was fascinated by the electronic facsimile of the 1786 Kilmarnock Edition and quickly found his favourites.

Mary Stones, David Hopes, Caroline Glenn and



Nat Edwards, who have lived and breathed the exhibition for so long, each expressed the sentiment that the opening of the Robert Burns Birthplace Museum was "exciting but a little bit sad". David compared the opening to childbirth.

He said that, as curator, his job was "to remind people that it was about the collection", and forecast that the collection would become a destination in its own right. Mary wanted to appeal to the non-enthusiast as well as the committed.

The reaction of the Scobies – Brian a Burns enthusiast, Eleanor confessing to being marginally less so – would suggest this talented team have pretty much got it right. Brian said: "It's artistically sound and vastly pleasing to the eye," while Eleanor added: "We'll be back."

● *Robert Burns Birthplace Museum, Murdoch's Lone, Alloway KA7 4PQ, tel: 0844 493 2601. Open 1 Apr-30 Sep, daily 10-5.30; 1 Oct-31 Mar, daily 10-5 (closed 25, 26 Dec and 1, 2 Jan).*

David Hopes, above, compared the long-awaited opening to childbirth. Above left: there is lots to see outside as well as in