

## Burns' Gregg Violin US Tour / January 2020



It's a long way from Tarbolton to Santa Monica, but the Burns' Gregg Violin has a wonderful ability to transport people through space and time.

This January, the National Trust for Scotland, the Scottish Government, and The National Trust for Scotland Foundation USA collaborated to bring this historic instrument associated with Robert Burns on an epic journey across the United States, stopping in five different cities over 18 days.

David Hopes, the Trust's Head of Collections & Interiors (Policy), and formerly curator and director of Robert Burns Birthplace Museum, was joined by [Alistair McCulloch](#) of the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, arguably the country's finest fiddler and an experienced player on this particular violin. Together, they travelled 16,000 miles performing live to over 1,700 people at 21 events and broadcasting to hundreds of thousands more by TV, radio, and podcast.

The trip coincided with the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary year of [NTSUSA](#), which has so far sent \$10 million across the Atlantic to support the work of the Trust, \$1.5 million alone for projects associated with Burns. It was therefore very fitting that an object that occupied such an important place in the life of Burns was able to celebrate Burns's birthday with friends and supporters in the US.

The Gregg Violin came to the Trust in 1995 following its discovery atop a wardrobe and was conserved as a playable object in 2015. It is usually on display at the Robert Burns Birthplace Museum and played at a small number of events during the year – which, ironically, is essential to maintaining its condition.

But what makes it so special? At the age of 19, Robert Burns came to the building now known as the [Bachelors' Club](#) in Tarbolton to take dance lessons from a man called William Gregg. Gregg moved Burns with the sound of his fiddle and there's every chance the poet also played this instrument, given his growing interest in Scots music and his sister's testimony that he owned a fiddle at this time. Its ability to be played and heard today allows people to connect with Burns in a way that few other objects can.

The tour kicked off on January 16, with Alistair playing the violin to passengers and staff, at Edinburgh Airport before boarding a flight to New York City, the first stop in a wide-ranging itinerary that involved meeting hundreds of current and prospective supporters at high profile Burns Nights, museum visits, schools, care homes, radio broadcasts, and podcasts.

## **New York City / January 16-17**



The Burns Society of the City of New York provided a warm welcome to Alistair and David at a private reception at the Union Club. The following day, David read from the dedication of the Robert Burns statue in Central Park (which has recently been threatened with removal) to a group including Jonathan Kuhn, NYC Parks Director of Art and Antiquities.

When the sculpture by Sir John Steell was unveiled in 1880, more than 5,000 people from all walks of life attended the ceremony – with one noting, *“To what other man was it ever given so to transfigure the country of his birth and love. Every bird and flower, every hill and dale and river whisper and repeat his name, and the word Scotland is sweeter because of Robert Burns.”*

While it was too cold to take the violin out of its case in Central Park, the fiddle was the centre-piece of the American-Scottish Foundation's Burns Night that evening. Held at the

University Club and attended by more than 200 guests including NTSUSA Chair Cherie Burton, Trustee Jill Joyce, and Patron Helen Sayles, the evening featured a musical tribute to Robert Burns by Alistair, who also played for the *ceilidh* at the end of the night.

### **Chicago (Part One) / January 18**



The next morning, Alistair and David – along with their travel companions Rory Hedderly from the Scottish Affairs Office in Washington and Kirstin Bridier of NTSUSA – were up bright and early for a flight to Chicago. There were some brief technical difficulties with one of the locks on the violin's specially-made case, but fortunately the instrument was freed in time for Alistair to perform alongside acclaimed violinist Rachel Barton-Pine and the Glasgow-based songwriting duo Noisemaker at a musical celebration of Robert Burns hosted by ChicagoScots.

## Boston / January 19-22



In Boston, Alistair and David had the opportunity to bring the Gregg Violin to the North Bennett Street School's violinmaking and repair program. (The North Bennett Street School is the nation's first trade school, founded in 1881.) Professor Roman Barnas examined the instrument with great interest and pointed out several features to his students and the team from the Trust, including the fact that the woods used were typical in violinmaking and that the highly-decorated exterior resembles Italian instruments by Amati as much as it does Scandinavian examples. Alistair, who has worked with students of a similar program in Glasgow, lit up as he played the Gregg Violin and then compared its mellow resonance to the sharper sound of a modern violin recently crafted by one of the young violinmaking students, a former sculptor. The instrument was also examined by objects conservators at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum during a tour of that quintessential Boston institution.

Harriet Cross, British Consul General to New England, welcomed a group of sixty to her residence in Beacon Hill in celebration of NTSUSA's 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Guests included NTSUSA Trustees and Patrons Leslie Aitken and Dutch Treat, Jeannie and Henry Becton, Frannie Colburn, Nicholas Gleysteen, Holt and Sandra Massey, Michael and Marcy Scott Morton, and Helen and DuWayne Sayles. There were also many new friends and representatives from partner organizations like Scottish Heritage USA, the Scots Charitable Society, and NH Scots on hand.

The next day, David and Alistair recorded a Burns Night special for Brian O' Donovan's [WGBH Celtic Sojourn](#), a popular National Public Radio program heard across the US, and

also were interviewed for the [PreserveCast](#) podcast discussing the violin's ability to build support for the conservation work of the Trust.



That evening, Alistair's performance served as the Immortal Memory for a festive Burns Night at Boston's Somerset Club that was attended by NTSUSA Trustees and Patrons. Alistair also accompanied singer Maureen McMullan as she performed *Ae Fond Kiss* and other classic Burns songs.



## Los Angeles / January 23



Alistair, David, and Rory were up early once more for a flight to Los Angeles, where the violin was featured at the BAFTA LA Burns Bash hosted by Sam Heughan, the star of *Outlander*. Scottish pop star Lulu sang *Auld Lang Syne* accompanied by the Gregg Violin, and Leslie Nichol and other British celebrities were able to view the instrument and learn about its history at the exclusive event, held at the Fairmont Santa Monica.

## Washington, DC / January 24 – 28

Kirstin rejoined the group in Washington, DC, where David gave a wonderful Immortal Memory for the Scottish Universities Burns Night and Ceilidh, held at The Willard Intercontinental Hotel, to a group of more than 200 alumni of all ages, as well as representatives of the British and Irish governments. Alistair performed a medley of songs, including the crowd favorite *The Mason's Apron*, to a standing ovation.

NTSUSA Trustee Naoma Tate joined Alistair and David for a private visit to the Library of Congress, where representatives from the American Folklife Center, Rare Books and Music Departments shared their collection of Burns ephemera. While the Trust holds many of the same pieces in its collection, the group was able to view some early American printings of Burns's songs, as well as a 19<sup>th</sup>-century copy of Burns's poetry bound in wood from "the

Banks of the Doon” and marked as “Bought in the Cottage.” Even in the hushed library, Alistair was encouraged to play for the group.



Later that day, Alistair and David visited Cedar Hill, a National Park Service site and the last home of Frederick Douglass. The writer, orator, and abolitionist revered Burns and visited Alloway during his lifetime. Alistair played *A Man’s A Man For A’ That*, a work that Douglass often quoted, in his very parlor.

### **Chicago (Part Two) / January 29 – February 1**

The tour ended with a robust series of outreach programs arranged by Gus Noble, President of ChicagoScots, including performances at two senior care homes and two elementary schools. Alistair offered a violin workshop to young pupils of the Old Town School of Folk Music. The violin was received with equal intrigue and adoration by those young and old, providing Alistair with an endless stream of questions and comments about the instrument.



The violin was also a surprise guest and highlight of the evening at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual Scottish Alumni Burns Night Celebration hosted by Alan Gogbashian, British Consul General to Chicago. Mr. Gogbashian, taking up his post only weeks before, received a spirited Scottish welcome to Chicago with the event being his first official gathering at his private residence. The final event was a Burns Night celebration for 150 held at the Lake Forest History Center, just outside the city.

As a cultural diplomat, the Burns' Gregg Violin demonstrated tremendous power in winning affection for Scotland, and the Trust's willingness to use its collections in this way shows it as forward-looking and imaginative. Hearing the violin has tugged on the heart strings of a great many in the US and will garner support to continue to care for what makes this country 'Lov'd at home and rever'd abroad'.

Burns would surely dance (and drink!) to that.

