



# A border romance

*Abbotsford, near Melrose, Roxburghshire*

In creating his dream home, Sir Walter Scott pioneered a Scottish version of the Gothic Revival. Mary Miers visits his newly reopened Tweedside mansion

Photographs by Simon Jauncey



**T**HE reopening of Abbotsford following a £12 million programme of improvements has brought visitors flocking back to this most venerated of literary shrines. They come not only to see the world-famous house much as its creator left it, but to savour something of that intoxicating romance—the Scotland invented by Sir Walter Scott. Abbotsford was on the tourist route when Scott was still in residence, popularised by the fame of his poems and novels; it fell out of fashion in the 20th century, but is celebrated today as a fascinating document of Scott's taste and obsessions, complete with some of the best-preserved late-Georgian interiors in Scotland.

Situated between the Eildon Hills and a 'fine reach of the Tweed', this was Scott's retreat from Edinburgh

*Fig 1 preceding pages: The entrance front, showing the 1818 wing, broadly Tudor in style with Scots Renaissance detailing (left) and the more Baronial 1823 wing*  
*Fig 2 below: The entrance hall, conceived as a showcase for Scott's collection of antiquities*

life and his base for duties as Sheriff-depute of Selkirkshire; a place where he could write and explore his Border roots, indulge in the pursuits of an improving laird and create an atmospheric showcase for his growing collection of antiquities.

Scott's vision for Abbotsford was ever-changing, so that it evolved from 'an ornamental cottage in the style of the old English vicarage-house' to a Baronial mansion with a strong Scottish stamp (*Fig 1*). In reality, it was little grander in scale than a villa, although Scott boasted to Goethe in 1827: 'I have a stately antique chateau... and a gigantic bloodhound to guard the entrance', and he employed 'a tall and stalwart bagpiper in complete Highland costume'.

Life as the Laird of Abbotsford began unprepossessingly in 1811, when, on

the back of his hugely successful early poems, Scott bought a marshy farm known as Clarty Hole (dirty hollow). Renaming it after the ford used by monks from Melrose Abbey, he had already planted trees on the 'bare haugh and bleak bank by the side of the Tweed' before moving here in 1812; soon he had increased his landholding to 1,400 acres.

Recurrent ill-health and later financial collapse seemed not to deter him: 'How did Sir Walter find time to attend to all he did?' wondered Maria Edgeworth in 1823, 'his building, his trees, his gardens and meadows, his hospitality to the guests of all ranks.'

## ‘In Scott's hands, the theatrical effect triumphed’

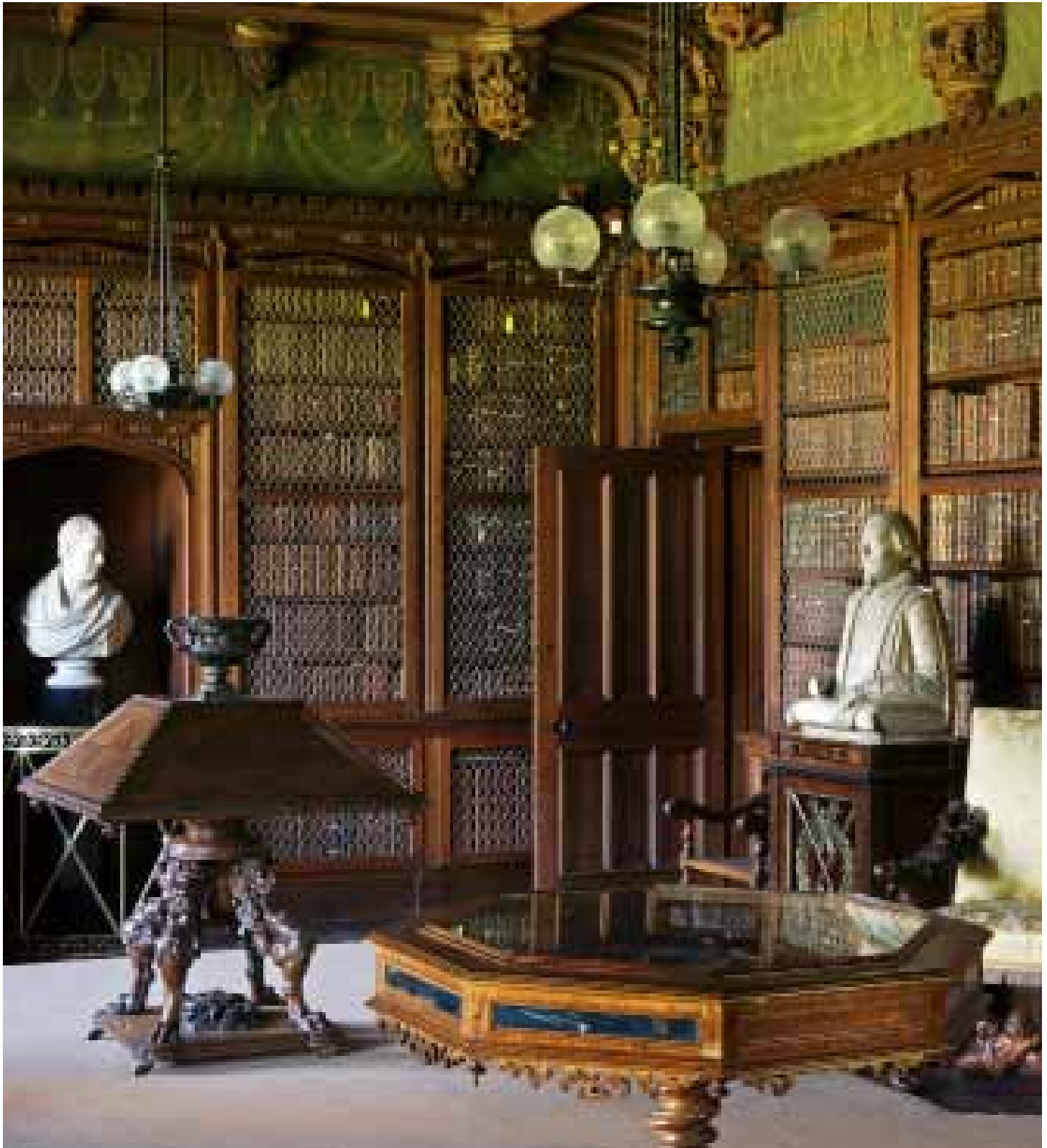
Among the friends who played a significant role in realising Scott's fantasy were three professional architects. William Stark of Glasgow drew up an initial scheme, but died in 1813. The modest farmhouse was embellished as a *cottage ornée* before Scott embarked on the first significant building phase—an extension of 1817–18 to accommodate a study, dining room and boudoir (the armoury), with a conservatory (later demolished) and bedrooms above.

Edward Blore and William Atkinson both prepared schemes for this work. Atkinson, whose plan Scott thought 'ingenious', would become the executant architect, but Scott preferred Blore's exterior design as being 'less Gothic and more in the old fashioned Scotch stile which delighted in notch'd Gable ends & all manner of bartizans'.

In 1820, he wrote to his wife: 'I have got a delightful plan for the addition at Abb. which I think will make it quite complete and furnish me with a handsome library and you with a drawing-room and better bedroom with a good bedroom for company etc. It will cost me a little hard work to meet the expence.' Conceived as 'an old Scottish manor house', this larger wing—the part containing most of the rooms on view today, including Scott's new study (*Fig 6*)—was designed by Atkinson and built in 1822–3, obliterating the old farmhouse.

With its enclosed forecourt, crow-stepped gables, pepperpot turrets and





castellated tower, it imparted a stronger Baronial note and enhanced the Picturesque skyline with a battery of tall chimneys. This was Scott's own version of his fictional Tully-Veolan, described in *Waverley* as having 'projections called bartizans, and displayed at each frequent angle a small watch tower, rather resembling a pepper box than a Gothic watchtower'.

It would be another few decades before the full-blooded 'Scotch Baronial' caught on, but Abbotsford can lay

**Fig 3: The library. When Scott died, Chantrey's superb bust was moved to the end niche, designed to display Bull-ock's Shakespeare cast and pedestal, which have now returned to the room**

claim to being the prototype for the world's first national-revivalist style.

Scott's decoration of Atkinson's Gothic rooms established the key components of the Scotch Baronial interior. Later imitations would come to be ridiculed as distasteful and bogus, but in Scott's hands, the theatrical element triumphed. (Not all agreed: Ruskin thought Abbotsford 'perhaps the most incongruous and ugly pile that gentlemanly modernism ever designed'.)

The earlier range was fitted out

and furnished with new work, but the grander 'Baronial' wing was innovative in incorporating plundered fragments of carved stone from ancient ruins and relics of demolished buildings, in addition to the casts and copies of architectural detail and heraldic motifs. The library ceiling (**Fig 3**) bristled with pendant bosses cast from celebrated monuments such as Rosslyn Chapel and Melrose Abbey; the hall chimneypiece was modelled on the Abbot's Seat in the





**Fig 4 left: The drawing room, with cornice painted by Hay to match the cedar wood-work. Raeburn's portrait of 1808, which replaced the chimney glass long ago, shows Scott with his dogs Camp and Percy. The Chinese paper was given by a relation who worked for the East India Company**

of gingerbread; it costs very little more than oak, works much easier, and is never touched by vermin'.

The space between the bookcases and ceiling was painted with lambrequins in green and gold, recently revived with gentle cleaning. In the armoury, Scott had the vault painted to imitate ashlar and the walls grained to resemble horizontal oak boards; all this has now been reinstated after years of subjugation to a shade of pink.

The one room that allowed Lady Scott's feminine touch was the drawing room (*Fig 4*), which glittered with gilding and mirror glass and had furnishings by Trotter. Atkinson designed the Gothic chimneypiece, its purple marble complementing the 'splendid Chinese paper' (a gift) and curtains of crimson silk damask.

The highpoint was the sunburst gasolier supplied by James Milne. For all his love of the past, Scott embraced modern technology and was among the first to install gas lighting and pneumatic bells. He called Abbotsford his 'Conundrum Castle', 'for while it pleases a fantastic person in the stile and manner of its architecture and decoration it has all the comforts of a commodious habitation'.

Among the key figures in his committee of taste was the flamboyant actor/manager Daniel Terry, who had trained with the architect Samuel

**Fig 5 below: The Armoury, with Hay's painted imitation of oak boarding and the 1507 portrait of James IV (recently loaned to the Scottish National Portrait Gallery) now reinstated**

Melrose cloister and the porch was copied from Linlithgow Palace.

Many artefacts, such as the door from the old Edinburgh Tolbooth inserted into an external wall, were gifts to the famous antiquary; his friends helped him acquire suitable antiques to furnish the new wing.

Abbotsford was not the first to revive the practice of hanging arms and armour in a domestic setting, but to experience the world of Scott's novels brought alive in his own home through his renowned collection of antiquarian curiosities was unparalleled. Here were Rob Roy and Montrose's swords, Asian suits of armour, Cromwell's shirt of mail, battlefield relics from Flodden to Waterloo, guns ancient and modern, 'broadswords, targets, pistols, lances and daggers', horns, pikes, hunting trophies and human skulls.

Scott divided them between his armoury (*Fig 5*) and the entrance hall (*Fig 2*)—an amalgamation of the baronial halls in Scott's novels *Ivanhoe* and *Rob Roy* with its panelling of oak pews salvaged from Dunfermline Abbey,

armorial glass and escutcheons, and roof painted to imitate 'somewhat weather beaten and faded' beams. The theatrical effect would be widely imitated.

Much of the work was carried out by local craftsmen, such as the joiner Joseph Shillinglaw and the Smiths of Darnick. But the master of the interior was Scott's protégé David Ramsay Hay, who would become the leading Edinburgh decorator of his day. 'He ordered me to paint the dining-room ceiling, cornice, niches, &c. in imitation of oak to match the doors, window-shutters, and wainscoting which were made of that wood; to emblazon some small shields in the bosses of the ceiling, with their heraldic metals and colours,' Hay noted in his detailed account of his first commission.

His painted decoration at Abbotsford is a miraculous survival. In the library, still with Scott's books in their precise places, Hay painted the ceiling to imitate Jamaican cedar, the wood chosen by Scott for the joinery as being 'finely pencilled and most beautiful, something like the colour





Wyatt and married Elizabeth Nasmyth, daughter of the famous artist. Terry acted as Scott's agent, seeking out furnishings and antiquities and advising him on planning and design; his wife painted the coloured glass.

The entrepreneurial cabinetmaker George Bullock, who also worked with Atkinson for Scott's kinsman the Duke of Buccleuch at nearby Bowhill, was another crucial contributor until his sudden death in 1818. He supplied furniture, casts and chimney-pieces from his Anglesey marble quarry and advised on arrangements and decoration. Their letters reveal Scott's deep interest and involvement in every detail of the decoration and his escalating excitement as work progressed: 'I am quite feverish about the armoury' and 'I am impatient to see the stained glass,' he wrote to Terry in 1818, and to Lord Montagu: 'I believe Atkinson is in despair with my whims.'

The remarkable survival of the main interiors at Abbotsford is paralleled by the mass of documentary information charting the whole project. Turner filled a sketchbook while staying here in 1831; the artist William Allan made a set of drawings recording the arrangement and furnishing of the principal rooms at the time of Scott's death in 1832; Fox Talbot took the first ever photograph of a country house on a visit in 1845, and numerous later descriptions and photographs survive, along with Atkinson's drawings.

All this, together with advice from experts such as Ian Gow, and Clive Wainwright's definitive account in *The Romantic Interior; The British Collector at Home 1750–1850*, has guided recent works. These include the reinstatement of the 'religious corridor', latterly a storeroom, and the return of objects to their original positions. A priority for the next phase must surely be to replicate key textiles from surviving fragments and records; without them, the main rooms lose something of the richness that Scott intended with his brilliant harmonising of textures and colours.

Such was the author's fame that, on his death, it was decided to preserve the house as he left it, for public view. In 1853, his heirs, the Hope-Scotts, commissioned William Burn to add a private wing—effectively, a separate house to which they could retreat during the tourist season. Scott's last descendant to live here was Dame Jean Maxwell Scott who, with her



sister Patricia—they were known as the Abbotsford Ladies—struggled to keep the house going as visitor numbers dwindled, until her death in 2004. That *COUNTRY LIFE* first featured Abbotsford only in 1989 is indicative of how unfashionable such places were for much of the 20th century.

In the family rooms, the Ladies' American stepmother had dispensed with the Victorian 'Gothic gloom' for a modish 1930s scheme of pale shades and Parisian furnishings. The main casualty was Scott's dining room, which she bleached to its present all-pervading white. The room was later added to the public tour, largely as a tribute to the fact that Scott died

**Fig 6: Scott's study, completed in 1824, was plainly furnished in contrast to the library. Here, he wrote his later novels and nine-volume biography of Buonaparte. The desk is a copy by Gillow of one that he made in 1810 for John Morritt of Rokeby**

here. Now that the interesting 20th-century layers have elsewhere been expunged, with Burn's wing stripped out and converted to smart holiday lets, the dining room's startling white is without context and the argument for reinstating Atkinson and Hay's Gothic scheme seems more compelling.

This and other curatorial dilemmas will, no doubt, be resolved in due course. Meanwhile, the Abbotsford Trust, which was formed in 2007, can celebrate its achievement in repairing and reviving this important house and concentrate on its plans for phase two: the restoration of the gardens, orangery and stables. [www.scottsassbotsford.co.uk](http://www.scottsassbotsford.co.uk)