



Hillfoots Tales

SHARING THE MAGIC

connecting people and place to
promote wellbeing through the magic
of storytelling

The Hillfoots Tales Story

Hillfoot Tales collects and shares local myths, tales and legends to preserve our heritage. Founded in December 2017 we work to bring a sense of belonging to people, the spaces they call home and the stories associated with it.

Hillfoots Tales originated after being inspired by the storytellers of northern Scotland, leading to the thought that Clackmannanshire and its surroundings have a wealth of tales that deserve to be told.

Oral storytelling can be traced back throughout Scottish culture, and indeed many other cultures, for centuries. However, in the modern world this intimate tradition of telling and trading stories has become less common and evolved to suit an ever growing online world connected through social media.

Despite the benefits that social media has, we think that traditional oral storytelling still has a place in society today and that we need to preserve our ancient art.

The work we do has been made possible by funding from the Creative Communities program and the National Lottery and the Scottish International Storytelling Festival. Through this we have been able to think even bigger and be able to create magical moments through the power of storytelling for even more people.



Clackmannanshire

Despite being the smallest Scottish county, Clackmannanshire has a rich history full of tales and legends. Located in Central Scotland, the county sits between the River Forth and the Ochil Hills, which has scenery which is otherworldly at times. Castles, glens, towns and villages, Clackmannanshire offers an abundance of experiences that will leave you amazed.

With a history stretching as far back as the celtic times Clackmannanshire is no stranger to a tale or two. The county's name comes from the county town of Clackmannan, which itself originates from the Gaelic name Clach Mhannainn. When translated this means Stone of Mannan. There are various stories behind how Clackmannan got its name, but they tend to revolve around the idea of the Stone of Mannan.



The Stone of Mannan itself now lies near the Mercat Cross on the high street of Clackmannan, pictured to the left. Potential tales behind the stones name come from possible associations with a pre-Christian deity or the Manau Gododdin tribe who inhabited the lands in around 540 AD.

It has also previously been claimed that the Stone of Mannan's name derives from "the Stone of the Monks". This has been based on the idea that

"manach" translates from Gaelic to a monk. This claim stretches back as far as the 19th Century, but the validity behind it is often scrutinised. Regardless of the exact story behind Clackmannanshires name, it is a place where stories and tales come to life.

Clackmannanshire



Clackmannanshire also has a connection to one of Scotland's most well known figures, Robert the Bruce. With the Bruce often using the royal forests of Clackmannanshire as hunting grounds. Part of the Clackmannanshire legend surrounding Robert the Bruce states that when Bruce was resting he put down his gauntlet only to forget it when he set off again. Despite sending his trusted knight Sir James Douglas back, the

gauntlet was never found. Even today the place where this story is said to take place is called Look About Ye Brae in reference to this event. Robert the Bruce's descendants have inhabited the area, initially holding the title Baron of Clackmannan. A notable descendant of Robert the Bruce was Katherine Bruce who even pretended to knight poet Robert Burns using one of Robert the Bruce's swords at one of her many lively events.

Another key but more somber period in Clackmannanshire history was the persecution of the Alloa witches over 59 years, in particular from 1634-1662. In total 13 people from Alloa and its immediate surroundings were accused of witchcraft. The threat of being accused of witchcraft hung heavy amongst the communities, often resulting in ruthless action against those accused.



Clackmannanshire

Often people accused of witchcraft by others in their local community, and subsequently named others out of fear, one such instance was Margaret Duchill. Margaret's trial included accusations of demons, fairies and many other things associated with witchcraft. Unfortunately trials such as this, accusing both women and men of fraternising with the devil and his accomplices was common during this period in our history.

These events tie in with local tales of Black Kate, a victim of the persecution of witches, and of various types of fairies who are the wee folk of the hills. You could argue that the historic events of the county and the local mythology feed into each other, stoking the fire of local storytellers.

The historic town of Alloa is the highest point along the River Forth, providing a strategic advantage to those who inhabit the land. A key feature of the town is Alloa Tower, pictured to the right, which dates back to around the 12th century.

The Tower has a rich history, originally being the residence of the Erskine family, later the Earls of Mar. Mary Queen of Scots was known to visit, one such visit occurred on the 28th July 1566 following the birth of her son, James VI. Despite the many happy visitors Alloa Tower welcomed, it was not able to escape the witch trials that spread throughout the county. Today the Tower has provided us with an atmospheric backdrop for various storytelling events we have hosted.



Clackmannanshire

In more recent times it has been at the heart of the industrial revolution in Scotland. The woollen textile industry, coal mining and brewing became the primary source of income for the county in the 18th and 19th centuries. Towns such as Alva and Alloa played key roles in this development of Clackmannanshire as a thriving industrial county. Alloa in particular, due to its position on the river Forth, flourished as a river port allowing products from across Scotland access to the wider world.



This included the products of the brewing industry, silk and glass, again Alloa was central to this with the first brewing firms being founded in 1762 and 1784, Younger and Meiklejohn being the respective breweries. The alcohol brewed in Alloa made its way as far as London, the West Indies, Egypt and the Far East thanks to Alloa's strategic place along the Forth.

The earliest mention of Alloa as a port town come from 1502, with James IV provisioned a ship heading for Alloa Pow. However, it is likely that Alloa had a thriving maritime economy. It is captured perfectly by Daniel Defoe, author of Robinson Crusoe, who during a visit in the mid-18th century stated "A merchant of Alloa may trade to all parts of the world".

Clackmannanshire

Historic industries such as glasswork and whisky are still corner stones within Clackmannanshire and it's economy. Despite the Alloa Glass Works tracing it's founding to 1750 by Lady Francis Erskine the centuries old company still produces around 2 million glass bottles per day. The company has been able to build on the ancient art of glassmaking, modernising it through the use of machinery, whilst maintaining a sense of identity by using locally sourced materials to create the glass. In a way Clackmannanshire lends itself to glass work, as the Alloa Glass Works were able to source salt from Kennetpans, the picture below shows Kennetpans today. Subsequently sourcing it directly from the sand and kelp of the River Forth when Kennetpans was no longer a suitable source. Nowadays the Glassworks is operated by O-I, but their turnover remains as high as ever.

A notable Clackmannanshire resident within the whisky industry is John Jameson. Jameson's own wife Margaret Haig was the sister of the founder of Haig whisky. Although Jameson was born in Alloa it wouldn't be until moving to Ireland that Jameson's whisky was established. Back in Clackmannanshire the business of whisky was flourishing, with the Haig family whisky dynasty lasting around 350 years. Whilst many have closed over the years, the legacy left by those companies who no longer call Clackmannanshire their home remains. Those still in production reflect the rich heritage the county holds.



Our aim

Central to Hillfoot Tales is the promotion of oral storytelling traditions, the arts and the spectacular surroundings of the Clackmannanshire scenery. Through combining these we aim to promote greater wellbeing between people by connecting them to their wider community and the places we inhabit.

Oral storytelling is a continuous thread throughout humanity and our history. Our stories we collect and share help us form an identity and convey important information through a meaningful way. We aim to foster a sense of individual and community belonging through our storytelling.

Our stories derive from the lands we call home and the people we know, by reflecting on our stories it allows us to value our roots and what we have built from them. Through hosting our fortnightly storytelling sessions in Tillicoultry this connects stories and the community.

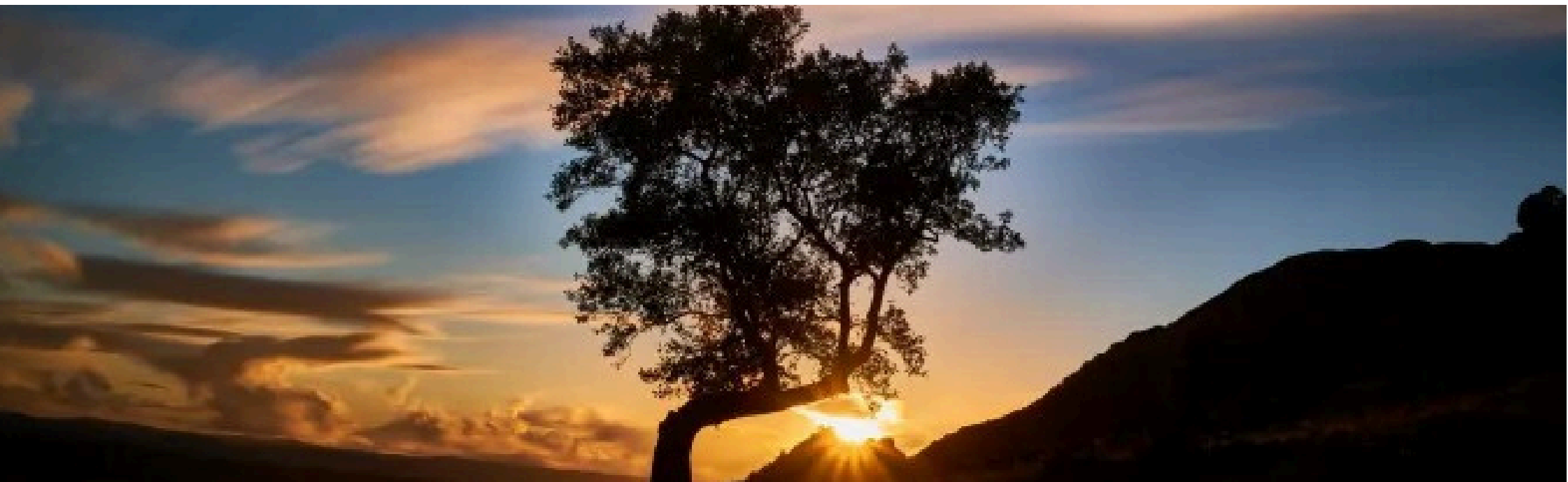
That is why we believe that this tradition is invaluable and its preservation is crucial and why we have adopted this as a central component to the work we do.



Our aim

We always look for ways to enable people of all ages and backgrounds to participate in our events and activities, as we believe everyone has a story to tell. To achieve this we develop a rich and varied approach to delivering our storytelling sessions. Whether that is storytelling and crafts events within a primary school setting or specific storytelling sessions at festivals.

Regardless of how each storytelling event is arranged and delivered, a core value shared between them all is the emphasis we put into fostering a sense of belonging. We believe that storytelling can help to enhance our wellbeing through allowing us to connect to each other through a creative outlet.



The creative space we strive to create can also help to benefit our own wellbeing. Creative outlets have often been said to help us to reduce the stress we feel and provide us with a safe space to express our emotions. The idea of better wellbeing is interwoven within Hillfoots Tales, we believe that engaging in creative outputs can slowly become a two way process of happiness and self-discovery, with greater wellbeing helping to foster greater creativity. This positive wellbeing within our community has always been, and will always be, something that is central to the aims of Hillfoots Tales.

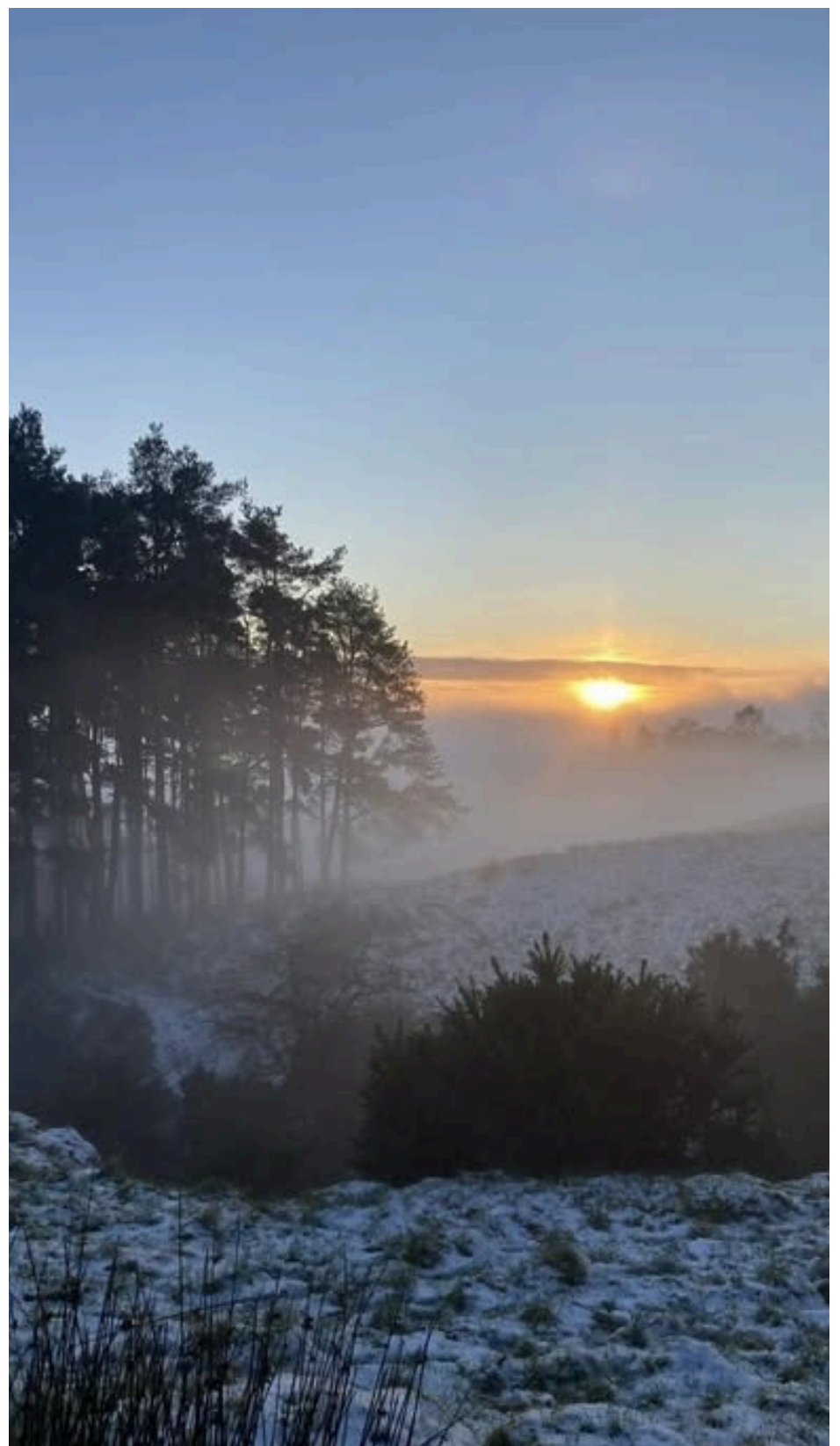
Our aim

Through our fortnightly storytelling sessions we aim to create a safe space to share a joint passion for storytelling. Along the way building up a community of lovely souls who help keep our history as oral storytellers alive.

As an organisation we are fortunate enough work in partnership with the Scottish Storytelling Centre and the Scottish International Storytelling Festival, helping us to spread the joys and power of storytelling to more people. However, we also deliver storytelling workshops to people of all ages, whether that is in:

- Art studios
- Schools
- Theatres
- Sheltered housing
- Local halls
- Out on location

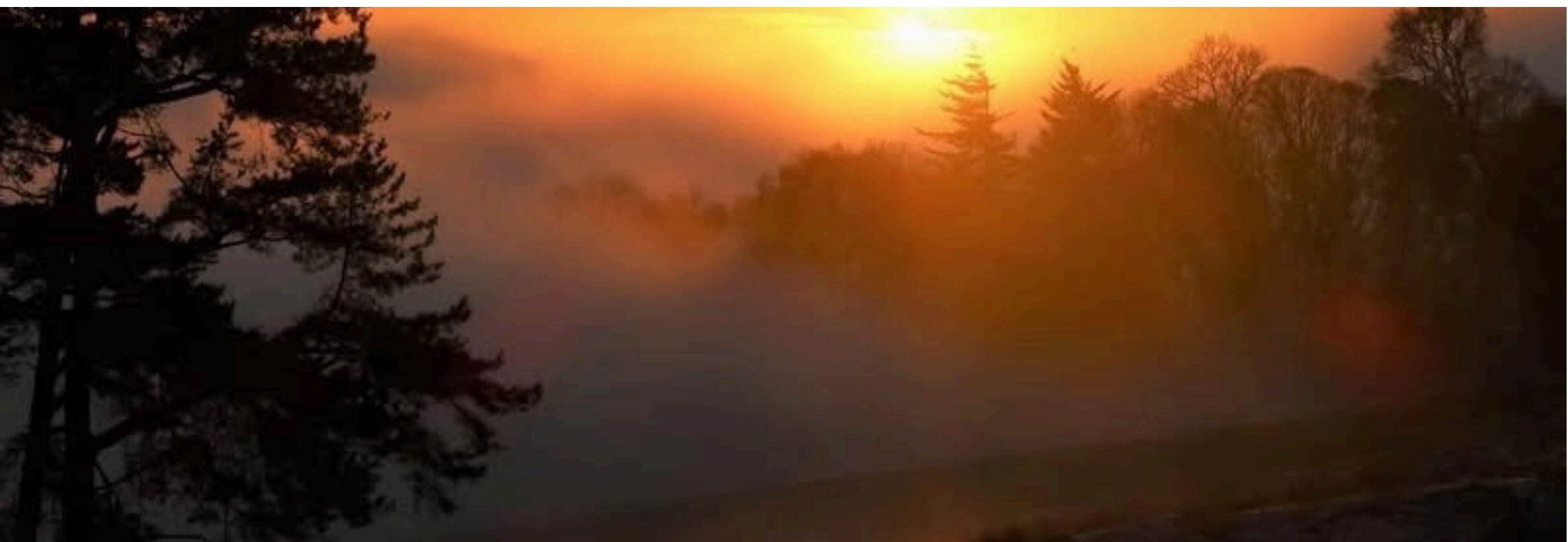
Our aims have always been straightforward, to share our history and tales through the means of oral storytelling, helping to keep this centuries old tradition alive, and to help inspire greater wellbeing within the community and individuals.



Previous work of ours

We have been involved with a variety of events and festivals throughout the years, especially the annual Scottish International Storytelling Festival.

The Scottish International Storytelling Festival brings together numerous Scottish and international storytellers and musicians, to share the joys of our local heritage with each other. Typically taking place in October, the perfect time to sit by a warm fire exchanging stories with each other, the community gathers and there is a wonderful trade of tales, anecdotes, music and songs. We have been lucky enough to perform at the festival on multiple occasions, with 2025 serving as our eighth year.



The festival takes place in October, and is ideal for sharing spooky stories of ghosts, witches and other things that go bump in the night. As well as sharing some of our local legends from the Clackmannanshire area. In 2025 we were fortunate enough to be able to perform at a variety of beautiful historic sites, such as the Alloa Tower and Inglewood House, serving as deeply atmospheric backdrops to the tales that were about to unfold.

Previous work of ours

Whilst the Scottish International Storytelling Festival is a highlight in our calendar each year, it is by no means the only event in our diaries.

Throughout the year we also run a series of events such as craft workshops as well as our oral tales. We have hosted “Her Story” workshops for women. Through our use of Applied Storytelling techniques we promote wellbeing, confidence and resilience in a relaxed setting. Through using both crafts and storytelling we aim to help create a safe space for people to express themselves and promote positive wellbeing within themselves and their environment.

Similarly we use these techniques at events for children and families. Our children and family events feature both creativity and storytelling as a must. As part of the Scottish International Storytelling Festival we held an event called “Mini Cats, Spiders and Funny Hats”, naturally we had to get creative and make a couple of witches hats and pumpkins.



Our fortnightly sessions

Through our regular storytelling sessions we have fostered a community connected through the joys that comes with storytelling. Each week we have a theme, such as 'Ochil tales' and 'midwinter', are transported to a variety of lands, times and cultures.

Our storytelling sessions take place on the first and third Wednesday of each month, with the Woolpack Inn in Tillicoultry serving as the perfect backdrop. As well as occasionally meeting in venues around the Hillfoots.



The cosy setting at the Woolpack provides the perfect setting to swap stories with each other and learn more about our history through story. We welcome people regardless of whether they want to share a story or simply sit and listen as all the tales unfold.



Our fortnightly sessions

Our sessions involve a variety of tales, poems and songs but will always connect to our theme for the evening, however tenuous the link might seem. You can expect local heritage tales and folklore as well as stories from across the globe. There is no requirement to share a tale, poem or song, but we do also play games or have a mini quizzes in between tales being told. Whilst it may not seem revolutionary, the act of getting together and connecting through a shared passion for spoken art can help you feel lighter afterwards.



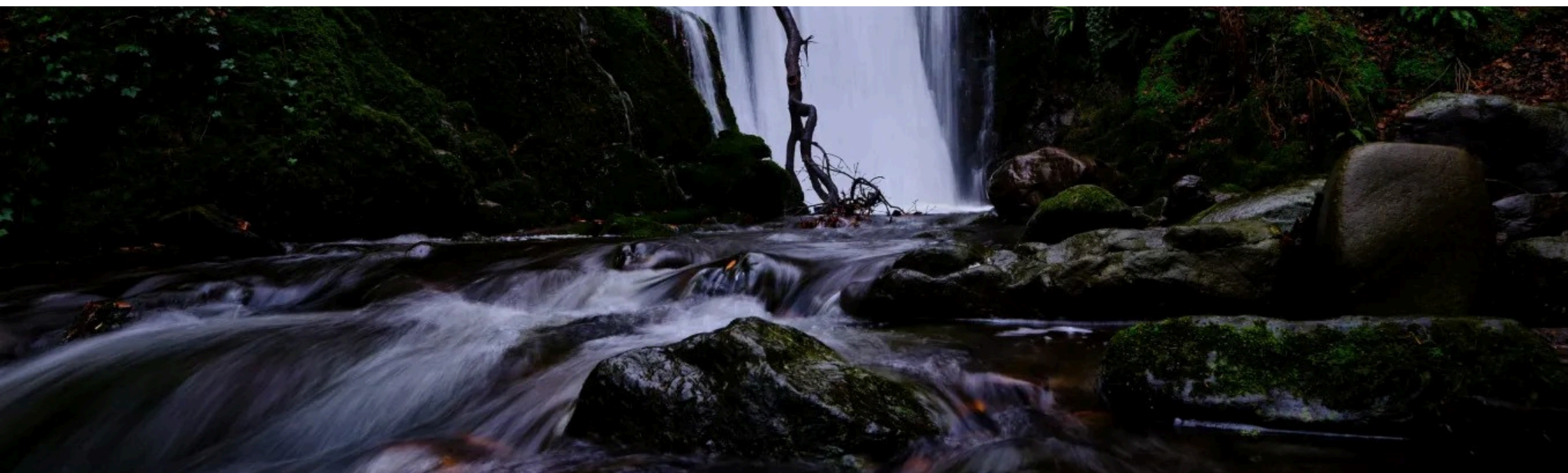
Around two or three times a year our storytelling sessions host a guest storyteller. The session runs similarly to our usual fortnightly but provides us with an opportunity to hear a variety of other tales from another professional storyteller.

Our sessions are at the heart of what we do. They allow us time to gather together and exchange tales, whilst nurturing our storytelling skills to keep this artform flourishing.

Plans for the future

Looking to the future we aim to grow as an organisation through building on what we have already achieved. Sharing stories are at the core of what we do, whether that is at our fortnightly sessions, the Wild Hillfoots Storytelling Festival or the Scottish International Storytelling Festival. We are all storytellers at heart. The joy that this brings shows how important the art of storytelling is.

Other opportunities we have developed and look to continue are our Women's Wellbeing Applied Storytelling Workshops. We have hosted our Wild Hillfoots: Herstory program. Central to these programs is learning how storytelling can help improve your wellbeing, by taking time to relax, reflect and build resilience. There is no cost to participants as these workshops are funded through bodies such as the National Lottery Community Fund. This gives our communities and opportunity to connect.



Additionally we aim to help more people along the path of becoming professional storytellers. We currently are supporting two apprentice storytellers by providing them with a safe space to practice and develop their storytelling skills. The art of storytelling is rich and varied, we believe that it is an art form that needs to be preserved. We hope to safeguard this historic artform as everyone has a story to tell.

Our team

We are a small but dedicated team to the art of storytelling and the wonders that come with it.

JOANNE DOWD

Director of Hillfoots Tales and a professional storyteller. Having performed at the Scottish International Storytelling Festival in Edinburgh and locally, Joanne has a wealth of stories to share about our history and the spaces we call home. Alongside the storytelling side Joanne also enjoys writing and has had work published in literary magazines and anthologies. Joanne's interest in storytelling has roots in her childhood, from hearing local tales handed down to her she was drawn to the magic of storytelling and piqued her interest in sharing these tales with others.



ELEANOR BELL

A storyteller. Eleanor is deeply involved within Hillfoots Tales making regular contributions to the fortnightly storytelling meetings. The joy that comes from stories and subsequently sharing that joy with others is something Eleanor loves. Always in the pursuit of improving her storytelling technique and learning new stories, Eleanor became an Apprentice Storyteller at the Scottish Storytelling Centre. Eleanor has taken part in many storytelling festivals such as the Bruce Festival in Dunfermline, enjoying the social connection that comes with it.



Our team

TANIA DRON

Performance and theatre has always held a special place in Tania's heart, having been involved in this sphere since an early age and ultimately studying acting. After finishing her studies Tania pursued opportunities to perform, educate, write and guide particularly in the area of tourism. Tania has been a member of Hillfoot Tales for a number of years and has found the community it fosters to be warm and welcoming. Particular highlights have been sharing and listening to stories in the company that it brings.



GAIL WATSON

Having spent time volunteering with Hillfoots Tales Gail was welcomed into the Hillfoots Tales Management Team. After discovering a flair for oral storytelling, our fortnightly meetings and events have helped Gail to develop her skills even further. A particular highlight was at the Scottish International Storytelling Festival in October 2023, as part of the "Wild Hillfoots" event. Here Gail delivered her first story as part of a professional performance. Outside of the realms of performances and storytelling you will usually find Gail out walking, reading, listening to music or travelling the globe.

Get in touch



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Hillfoots Tales



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