

BOOKISH IN BRITAIN

On a freewheeling UK tour, **PAYAL DHAR** stumbles upon her favourite literary inspirations—from James Herriot’s sheep-dotted Yorkshire to Rebus’s Edinburgh, the Bard’s home, and Platform 9¾. **ILLUSTRATIONS BY MEGHNA PATWAL**

SOMETHING ABOUT GREAT BRITAIN felt extremely familiar from the moment I set foot on its shores. But I couldn’t, for the life of me, put a finger on it. It continued to niggle as I was driven through the purple, heather-covered slopes of the Peak District; when my friend and I hiked along lanes bordered by jigsaw-like drystone walls, pushed through prickly gorse, and crossed farms and fields through gates that politely asked you to keep them latched and over stiles; when we watched the sheep dotting the landscape of the Yorkshire Dales as the sun went down.

It was much later at King’s Cross in London that the penny dropped—that luggage trolley pushed halfway into the wall separating the main concourse and the platforms did it. Though it wasn’t placed exactly at the junction of platforms 9 and 10, the Muggles lining up to get photographed with the half-trolley (wand and Hogwarts scarf provided on request) was evidence that it didn’t matter.

England—and later Scotland—was everything that I’d grown up reading and still read. Here was the view that Alf Wight, writing as James Herriot, might have marvelled at as he stretched his sore back after



a difficult night of foaling or calving. There was the perfect picnic spot where you could imagine the Famous Five having their lunch, or the little village shop where they might have stopped for tea or ices, during one of their adventures. I could have a drink at the same pub as John Rebus and Siobhan Clarke as they examined crime in Scotland's capital, or stroll along the river by which the Bard may have ruminated upon his next spark of literary genius.

James Herriot's Yorkshire

It all started at the Lake District years ago. A friend and I had made a pact as teenagers that we'd visit the Lakes together some day. 'Some day' had arrived, and it found us sitting on the steps of the barn we were camping in, drinking tea and gazing at a couple of sheep standing stupidly at the ground. A large hen pattered up to peer suspiciously at us, and then,



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without warning, a whole flock of sheep appeared, running up the hill and on to the road. They were flanked by a couple of sheep dogs keeping order in the ranks, and followed by a young shepherd in jeans and wellies riding an ATV. We watched in silence, and when they'd gone, I turned to my friend, "Were you thinking of James Herriot too?"

The Lake District lies to the west of James Herriot's Yorkshire, and looks upon the low, rounded sheep-dotted hills and dales that he often mentions in his memoirs—field after field of pastures, criss-crossed with drystone walls, and sprinkled with farms and hamlets. You could imagine there was something transcendental about it—so much so that it struck even a card-carrying atheist and scoffer of all things spiritual like me—staring upon a scene of the 1940s three quarters of a century later.

But for a more palpable back-in-time experience, Thirsk—where Herriot's veterinary clinic is located—is warranted. Herriot's original home and surgery, known as Skeldale House in the books, has been restored to its 1940s glory and is now the World of James Herriot Museum (worldofjamesherriot.com), complete with a sculpture of that well-loved image of Herriot with a lamb tucked under his arm. If you've read the books, like we had, you can see the anecdotes



come alive as you walk from room to room, and even peep into the WWII air-raid shelter. Oh, and definitely stop by at the shop to pick up a Tricky Woo coaster.

Stratford-upon-Avon

Moving on from memoirs to classics, Stratford-upon-Avon was also the result of an ambitious plan. A friend from the US (whom I'd never met —yes, I'm the person who travelled halfway across the world to meet an online friend) and I had decreed, for unspecified reasons, that our worlds were to collide at Shakespeare's birthplace. Alas, it was not meant to be! Her circumstances changed, and I found myself companion-less, not only during the Royal Shakespeare Company's Hamlet production, but in my minute exploration of the town, and in the large, sprawling room at the bed and breakfast we had booked.

Stratford is a small town, easily explored on foot, but I would recommend the open-air hop-on, hop-off Shakespeare tour if you're an information glutton. They take you around to all the scenic stops, including Anne Hathaway's thatched cottage (the guide told us that thatchers are few and far between these days, and these houses are difficult to insure because of the high fire risk). Shakespeare's own residence, New Place (no longer standing), has been converted to a garden, and Nash's House next door (belonging to his grandson-in-law Thomas Nash) is a museum—both owned by the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust. Alight at Bancroft Gardens to

Follow the Plot

The UK is full of hotspots for book nerds. Here are some literary recommendations.

1 WORLD OF JAMES HERRIOT

Thirsk in North Yorkshire is well connected by bus train and road. Coach tour packages are available, too. Museum tickets cost ₹790 (>15 years), ₹465 (5–15 years); worldofjamesherriot.com

2 SHAKESPEARE COUNTRY

The official open-top bus tour is the best way to take in Stratford-upon-Avon. Otherwise, explore on foot. visitstratforduponavon.co.uk

3 REBUS TOURS

The two-hour walking tour Hidden Edinburgh (₹1,395) explores many of the locations mentioned in the books, starting at Rebus's favourite, the Royal Oak pub. rebus-tours.com

4 ENID BLYTON'S DORSET

Most of Blyton's stories were set in picturesque Dorset. The heritage Swanage Railway return trip (₹1,395 for adults; ₹745 for children) to Corfe Castle (₹1,022 for adults; ₹511 for children) is a must. For details on more literary things, go to visit-dorset.com

5 AGATHA CHRISTIE'S WEST END TOUR

This guided walking tour takes you to various West End locations that Christie frequented and mentioned in her whodunits. Her play, *The Mousetrap*, has been running at St Martin's Theatre since 1952 (around ₹2,324). Details about this and other tours are at guidedwalksinlondon.co.uk

6 HARRY POTTER TOURS

There are dozens of operators offering Harry Potter tours, but check out Strawberry Tours for a free one. (You will be expected to tip the guide.) strawberrytours.com

admire the splendid swan fountain, and statues of the Bard himself plus four of his popular creations—Hamlet, Macbeth, Falstaff, and Hal.

Rebus's Edinburgh

A different friend, different circumstances, same story. In other words, I was stood up in Edinburgh. Again, for no fault of mine. But as I spotted a Lothian and Borders police van, it struck me that I was in the territory of John Rebus, Ian Rankin's maverick cop, of whom I was an admirer. And sure enough, strolling around the environs of the Royal Mile in Edinburgh's city centre, the darkly looming Edinburgh Castle keeping vigil, I was beside myself to spot familiar names and locations—Oxford Bar, Waverley Station, St Leonard's Police Station, Leith Walk, Salisbury Crags and Arthur's Seat (the scene of a particularly grisly fictional murder), Grassmarket, and more.

A more efficient way of doing it—which I discovered only later—would have been to opt for one of the walking tours. Rebus Tours cover many Rebus sights, plus some other Edinburgh greats, like Walter Scott, Arthur Conan Doyle, and Robert Louis Stevenson.

Blyton's Scones

You cannot have grown up on an enforced diet of Enid Blyton and not been fascinated by the abundance of food in her books. They set me



up to notice food in everything I read after that. Some of the stuff in her stories—like tongue or watercress sandwiches—always sounded awful (though having sampled egg-and-cress sandwiches, I have to say they aren't disgusting). From the 'full English' with bacon and fried tomatoes at breakfast, to fish and chips with vinegar and salt, Scotch pies and Cornish pasties in the day; from Irn-Bru and Pimms with lemonade to wash it down, to Bakewell tarts and scones with clotted cream for tea—these familiar-sounding foods sealed my final connection with the fictional world I've known and loved. The copious amounts of crumpets and chocolate hobnobs that came home with me will concur. +

GETTING THERE

The major cities of India and the UK (London, Manchester, Edinburgh, etc.) are well connected with numerous direct flights as well as one-hop connections. Within the UK, there is excellent bus and train coverage. For an unforgettable overnight journey from London to Edinburgh, try the **Caledonian Sleeper** (sleeper.scot), with its hotel-like en-suite double or twin rooms.

STAY

To explore James Herriot country, stay in the luxurious **Coniston Hotel and Country Estate** (from ₹9,292 per night; theconistonhotel.com) located right in the Yorkshire Dales, or **The Grand, York** (from ₹10,595; thegrandyork.co.uk) if you'd rather be in the city. The best luxury options in Stratford are **The Arden Hotel** (from ₹15,710; theardenhotel.com), a boutique hotel on the banks of the Avon, and **Hotel du Vin & Bistro** (from ₹8,366; hotelduvin.com) in the heart of town. In Edinburgh, you couldn't get fancier than **The Balmoral** (from ₹18,595; roccoforthotels.com), located centrally and overlooking Castle Rock. For a boutique stay in the historic Royal Mile, take a look at **The Radisson Collection Royal Mile** (from ₹11,713; radissonhotels.com).

