

Pythons and Coconuts at Doune Castle

BY KARL MAGEE

If you wandered through the historic surroundings of Doune Castle in September your quiet contemplation may have been shattered by the sound of coconut shells being clip-clopped, medieval knights going 'Ni!' and people complaining about dead parrots. These unusual sights and sounds were part of the celebrations that were taking place to mark a unique local contribution to British cinema. For it was Doune Castle that played the role of 'Castle Anthrax' in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975), an irreverent take on the legend of the Knights of the Round Table and one of the funniest British films ever made.

Doune Castle has a long and colourful history. It was built in the fourteenth century by Robert Stewart, Duke of Albany, the younger son of King Robert II and brother of King Robert III. In the fifteenth century it became a royal hunting lodge. Mary Queen of Scots passed through its gates in the sixteenth century and in 1745 it was seized by the Jacobites and used as a prison.

The Pythons weren't the first filmmakers to see the castle's appeal. It had been used as a location for the film *Ivanhoe* in 1952, starring a young Elizabeth Taylor alongside Robert Taylor and Joan Fontaine. The film included a scene which the Pythons would have been proud of when a soldier's rubber sword is clearly seen wobbling as he rushes into battle.

The Pythons arrived in Stirling in April 1974. Location shooting took place at Killin and on Sheriffmuir, but the bulk of the film was shot at Doune Castle. This was used as the location for a number of key scenes including the memorable 'Knights of the Round Table' song and dance routine.



Some of the cast on set

Finance on the film was tight. The coconut shells used to represent horses clip-clopping were a necessity, as the filmmakers couldn't afford real horses. The chain mail worn by the knights was knitted, making the costumes light and flexible - at least in theory. However, they hadn't taken into account a wet Scottish spring, which made

the costumes sodden, heavy and uncomfortable. Nor did the rain help the cardboard battlements that had been added to Doune Castle, with the actors having to avoid leaning against the soggy defences.

The budget for the film hadn't stretched to a cast of thousands, so extras were grabbed from a variety of sources. Tourists visiting the castle were invited to join in. The locals in Doune added to the crowd, and a call was put out to the University of Stirling for extras (the long-haired fashions of the time being perfect to play medieval knights and peasants). Many students accepted the invitation, including the author Iain Banks, and played their roles with gusto.

Doune Castle is now a popular destination for movie buffs and Python fans. Indeed it has been estimated that up to a third of its 25,000 visitors a year are there because of the film. It now hosts an annual Monty Python day in September, which has proved extremely popular.

And if you ever get the urge to gallop around the castle like a horse, Python-style, coconut shells are always available from the castle's visitor centre!

For more on Scotland's unique contribution to cinema history see: www.scotland.org/about/innovation-and-creativity/features/culture/stars.html

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We received the following from a Dr. Stewart Brodie of Westminster University.

At the start of WWII, probably 1939 or 1940, with my father in the RAF, my mother and I (then aged about 4) moved from London to Bridge of Allan. We stayed with a relative, Miss Elizabeth CARMICHAEL, of 'Dunallan', Keir Street, Bridge of Allan. This fairly large, detached villa was situated opposite St. Saviour's Episcopal Church. I believe the house was pulled down some time ago, and replaced with a car park!

Also staying in the house were my two cousins and their mother. At this time, the elder of my cousins, Evelyn DUNLOP (now STARK), started to attend Beacon School. We are trying to confirm the dates of our stay in Bridge of Allan and confirm the dates of her attendance at the school. Evelyn has pleasant memories of her time at the Beacon School, where 'a lovely

person', Miss Cameron, was head mistress. For the record, she still has her Beacon School blue beret with its gold tassel!

Unfortunately, Beacon(hurst) School does not have the records of the original Beacon School. Perhaps a reader knows where the records are. The only other piece of evidence I have is my National Registration Card Number, which I believe was issued in Bridge of Allan. The number was SLLZ/169/6. Please, could any reader with a National Registration Card, with the same prefix 'SLLZ', let me know the place and date of issue?

Any information or knowledge of the archived Beacon School records, or the 'SLLZ' prefix on National Registration Cards would be welcome.

Can any reader help? Please contact a committee member (see page 3) or email allan@bofatimes.co.uk - we will report any progress in our next issue.



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