



The Glenlivet stills

WHISKY GALORE!

Janice Hopper invites us to raise a glass to the 200th Anniversary of Scotch Whisky...

As we head towards winter, the thought of a celebratory dram on St Andrew's night, raising a glass at Christmas and Hogmanay, or savouring a glass of *uisge Beatha* (water of life) in front of the fire is a tempting prospect. Although whisky has been produced and enjoyed for centuries, people have been celebrating in 2024 the 200th anniversary of the official "legal" birthday of Scotch whisky – and people have been visiting in their thousands to hear the many tales surrounding that history.

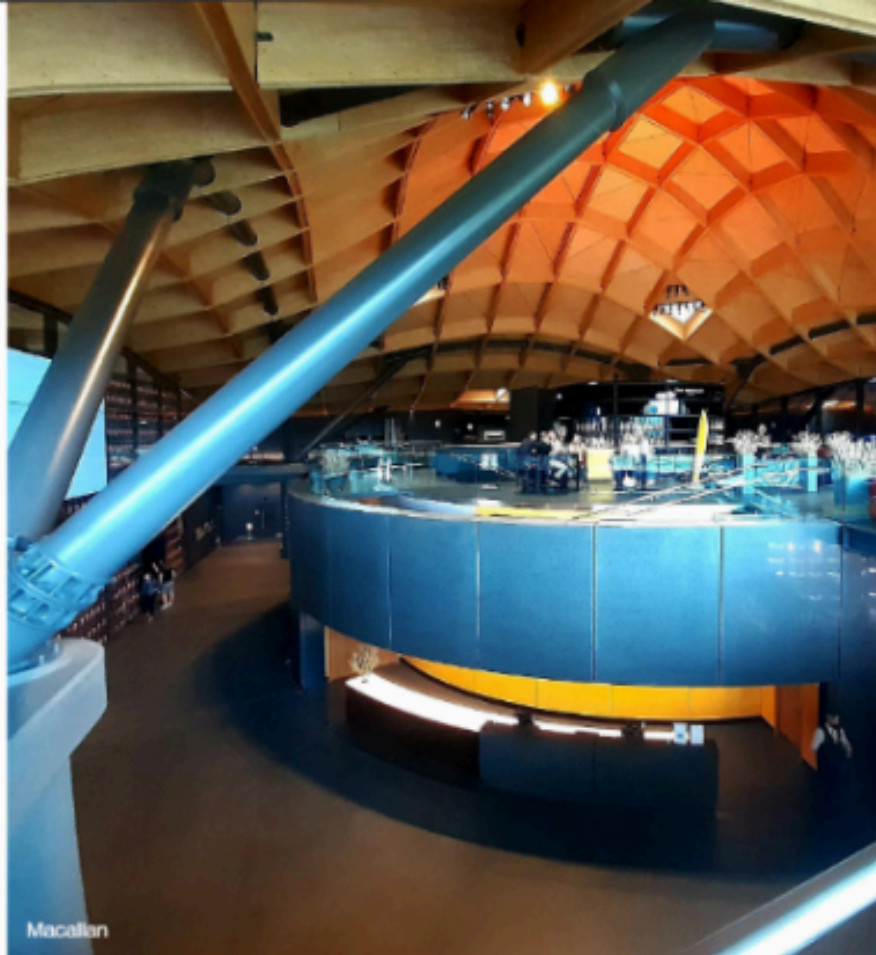
In the early 1800s most whisky distilleries were illicit and designed to evade the extortionate taxes imposed by the Government from 1644. Tucked away in the hills and glens of Speyside, harvesting the excellent barley and pure spring water the region had to offer, whisky was

produced, but tax wasn't paid. Excise men were sent into this unforgiving landscape to hunt down the illicit stills, usually run by farmers or their tenants, but to little avail. Even King George IV himself drank this illicit spirit when he visited Edinburgh in 1822, indirectly embarrassing the Government by drinking and thereby endorsing this liquor that the officials had failed to rein in. Something had to be done to tame this wild landscape, its distillers, and its "water of life".

In 1823 the Excise Act was passed, creating a more reasonable taxation system, and encouraging whisky distillers to come in from the cold. The first Speyside distiller to "go legal" in 1824 and obtain a licence was George Smith of The Glenlivet. Admittedly, this didn't go down well with illicit distillers in his neighbourhood,

who felt he'd broken ranks and betrayed their lawless band of brothers and sisters. The threats Smith received were particularly nasty, to the point that he carried a pair of flintlock pistols at all times. But slowly, throughout 1824, other distilleries, such as Macallan and Cardhu, came out of the shadows, keen to head down the "official" path and end the stress of evading the Excise men. Now able to trade, promote and celebrate their whisky, the companies expanded, invested and grew, and ultimately built the visitor centres that draw thousands of tourists to Scotland every year.

Each "1824 distillery" offers a different experience. Glenlivet in Gaelic means Valley of the Smooth Flowing One. It offers a plush, polished, luxurious visitor centre, where the cost of a tour ranges from £25 to £300.



Macallan

The Original Tour introduces guests to the cereals and landscape of the region, plus the people and makers behind the famous spirit, before visitors step among the vast copper stills, the large Douglas Fir mash tuns and the cool, dark warehouses where the whisky matures for a minimum of three years. The final stop is the tasting room where three whiskies are savoured. Drivers' packs are available too.

The Smith family continued to be innovative and instrumental in promoting whisky and exporting it. Colonel George Smith Grant contributed to the 1908-09 Royal Commission's definition and classification of what Scotch whisky actually was. And, after prohibition, Captain Bill Smith Grant helped The Glenlivet break the American market by striking a deal to serve whisky miniatures in Pullman train carriages, introducing the brand to the USA.

Thirteen miles down the road you can discover a smaller distillery, originally established around 1813, but also legally licensed in 1824. Cardhu is where the whisky

sisterhood is celebrated, and tour guides shine a light on the leading ladies of Speyside (tours start at £16). In the past, the farmers worked the fields and grew the barley, but it wasn't uncommon for women to tend the home and distil the whisky. This was the case of Helen Cumming, of Cardhu, who knew to keep her friends close and her enemies closer. Whenever the Excise men came to town, Cumming would warmly welcome them, comment on her day's yeasty baking, even put the men up for the night and feed them, while simultaneously raising a red flag to notify the townsfolk that the Excise men were on the prowl.

When her husband and son passed away, the reins of the farm and the whisky business passed to Cumming's daughter-in-law, Elizabeth, who partnered with John Walker and Sons in 1893, securing the future of the business and of the name of Cardhu. A golden statue of a woman carrying a bold red flag beside the striding figure of Johnnie Walker lets guests know they've arrived at this proud distillery.



Cardhu



Craigellachie Hotel Quach Bar





The Highlander Inn



The Glenlivet

A third and contrasting final stop in an 1824 tour is the eco-friendly Macallan with its sloping green roof and iconic space-age appearance. The eye-catching hillock-roof is made up of 380,000 different components.

Inside, visitors can drop into the modern Macallan Bar, or book whisky experiences ranging from The Heart of the Experience (£50) to the ultimate Mastery Experience at £250, which includes a welcome dram at the Macallan Whisky Wall, a production tour, tutored tasting in the Cave Privée, a dining experience with paired wines in Elchies Brasserie, whisky flight, and a gift to commemorate the visit.

Whisky is big business. According to the Scotch Whisky Association, 43 bottles of Scotch Whisky (70cl @40% ABV) are shipped from Scotland to more than 160 markets around the world every second and, in 2023, Scotch Whisky exports were worth £5.6bn. Although we'll never forget the stories, struggle, history, romance and intrigue of the illicit stills, 1824 is the year that Scotch whisky could be openly celebrated, produced and enjoyed. *Sláinte.*

■ **Janice Hopper is a freelance writer based in Aberdeen and specialising in travel, food, Scottish history and heritage.**



Macallan

■ WHERE TO STAY

Speyside is home to a range of whisky hotels at different price points. For simple three-star rooms and a well-stocked whisky bar, book The Highlander Inn (whiskyinn.com), run by whisky enthusiast Tatsuya Minagawa. Alternatively, book The Craigellachie hotel (craigellachiehotel.com) set in a Victorian country house. Its vibrant Quaich Bar has welcomed the likes of Kate Moss, Noel Gallagher and Sadie Frost.

- The Glenlivet - theglenlivet.com
- Cardhu - malts.com/en-gb/distilleries/cardhu/tours
- The Macallan - themacallan.com

Eastern Airways flies to Aberdeen, the gateway to Speyside, from Teesside, Humberside and Wick, and from Sumburgh (corporate charter service).



Inside The Glenlivet