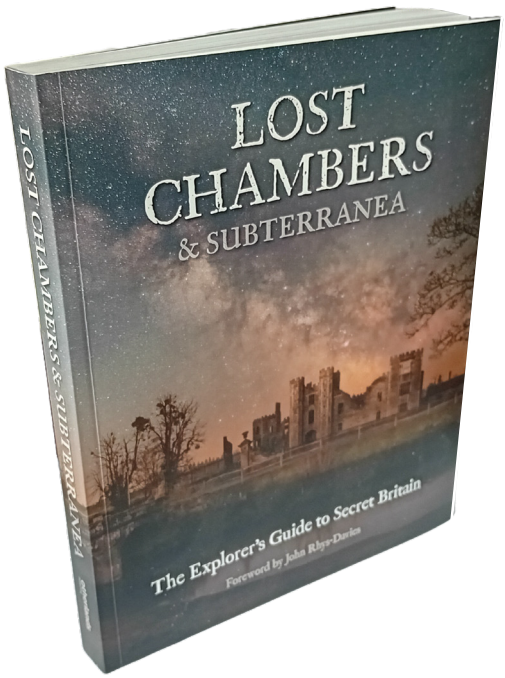


LOST CHAMBERS & SUBTERRANEA

The Explorer's Guide to Secret Britain

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DESCRIPTION

Step into the shadows and discover the secret and forgotten places of British history. From windswept castles and ancient inns to atmospheric ruins and labyrinths deep beneath the earth, *Lost Chambers & Subterranea* uncovers a hidden world of secret passages, escape tunnels, priest holes, sliding panels, concealed doorways, smugglers' caves and dungeons. These are places of intrigue and imprisonment, sanctuary and escape, where history lingers and every stone has a story to tell.

Featuring over 500 of Britain's most extraordinary and atmospheric locations, this book is an invitation to venture off the beaten track and explore the hidden side of the past. With regional maps and detailed directions, readers can discover remarkable places to visit and explore, including historic inns and ancient buildings where they can stay the night and uncover their secrets.

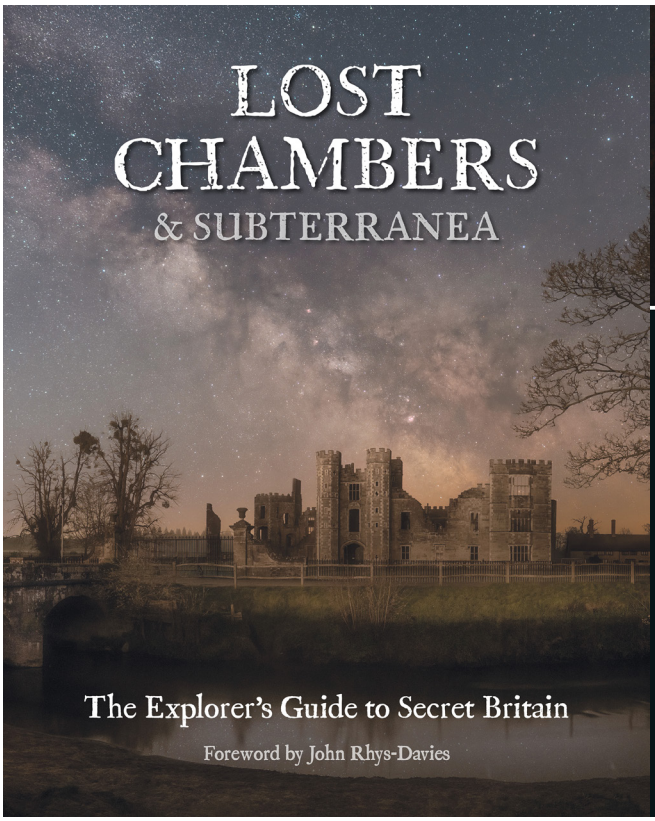
Meticulously researched, lavishly illustrated and brought to life through engaging travel writing, this beautifully designed book is as much a pleasure to browse as it is an inspiration to explore. A treasure trove for curious wanderers, history lovers and seekers of the unusual, it promises unforgettable adventures in Britain's lesser-known places.

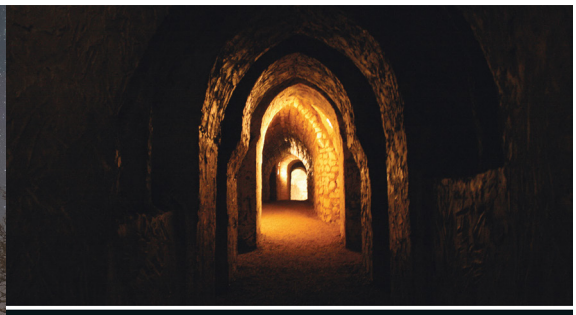
The book includes a foreword by actor John Rhys-Davies, best known for his roles in *The Lord of the Rings* and *Indiana Jones*.

KEY SELLING POINTS

- 500+ extraordinary locations
- Regional maps and detailed directions
- Alluring photography throughout
- Stunning cover images
- Foreword by John Rhys-Davies
- Printed in the UK







INCLUDED IN THIS ULTIMATE GUIDE TO SECRET BRITAIN

COMPREHENSIVE LISTINGS
The first full guide to historic sites with real and rumoured priest holes, secret passages, sliding panels, escape tunnels, dungeons, smugglers' caves, and more.

BEST LOCATIONS BY CATEGORY
The best locations for lost chambers & hiding places, caverns & grottoes, secret tunnels, ghosts & legends, crypts & dungeons.

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Atmospheric photography capturing the spirit and character of featured locations.

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From hidden rooms to underground realms, Britain is filled with secret places that whisper tales of the past. These enigmatic locations offer glimpses into a world long gone, where history intertwines with legend and myth.

Imagine exploring a moonlit abbey, its walls echoing with mystery and intrigue. Or entering the depths of a smugglers' cave, where shadows dance in flickering candlelight. Each step in such places is like turning the pages of a Gothic novel, unfolding a story lost for generations.

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Alvin Nicholas has a passion for the British countryside, archaeology, and travel writing. He trained in protected landscape management and has written books on diverse topics ranging from heritage and folklore, to woods and forests.

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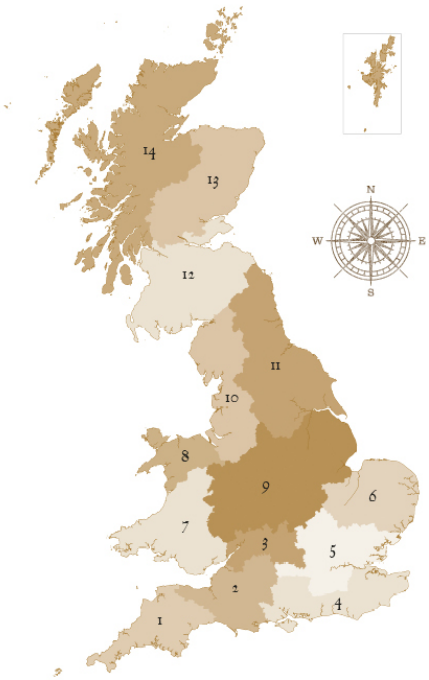
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Eilean Donan Castle (page 315)

Using this book

In each chapter, you will find an overview map featuring locations throughout the focus region. Sites and properties are assigned a number that corresponds to their position on the map. For most outdoor locations, you will find basic directions, OS map numbers, a six-figure OS grid reference, latitude and longitude coordinates, the nearest postcode, and websites if managed. For most indoor locations and managed properties, only basic directions, nearest postcodes, and websites are included.

You can locate places in the book by entering this information into your GPS, car satnav, or any GPS-enabled device. Online mapping services like Google Maps can also be used by entering the location name, postcode, or latitude and longitude coordinates, separated by commas. Bing and Streetmap offer free Ordnance Survey (OS) map extracts, which show physical and human features, types of vegetation, Access Land in England and Wales (at a 1:25,000 scale), public rights of way, Scottish 'core paths', and numerous long-distance trails and cycle routes. However, be aware that many rural areas may have limited or no mobile coverage, so it is advisable to take a screenshot or print a copy before you head out. Alternatively, apps like Outdooractive and Harvey's Avenza Maps allow you to download maps to your device, removing the need for a signal. OS Maps Online is another option that provides basic content and the ability to download maps, though there is a subscription fee for OS Explorer/OS Landranger maps and advanced features. The what3words app also works offline and is an extremely useful tool for pinpointing your exact location.

In remote regions, it is essential to carry a paper map (OS Explorer 1:25,000, the less detailed Landranger 1:50,000, or a Harvey equivalent), a compass, a whistle, and a first-aid kit. Inform someone of your plans, and avoid relying solely on electronic devices.

Safety & the law

As well as private and managed properties, this book features remote and potentially hazardous locations such as ruins, caves, and mines. Tread lightly at historic sites; leave no trace and take only photographs, avoiding unsafe structures. Stick to footpaths when visiting outdoor areas, unless you are on Access Land in England and Wales. Keep in mind that Scotland has different access rights, with the Land Reform Act (Scotland) of 2003 providing the legal right to access most open land and inland waters for recreation and other purposes.

Be aware that some sites in this book are located on private land, and their inclusion does not imply a right of access. If there are no public access arrangements, you will need to seek permission, noting that trespass is currently a civil matter, not a criminal offence. If a landowner or their representative asks you to leave, do so respectfully.

Avoid venturing too far into unmanaged caves, tunnels, and mines without a qualified guide and appropriate gear; watch for loose rocks and never start a fire beneath rock overhangs or underground.

Some sites featured in this book are accessible only by boat. If you plan to kayak, remain close to the shore, monitor the weather closely, and ensure you are wearing a properly fitting buoyancy aid.

Use your judgment near steep or unstable cliffs. Always carry a fully charged mobile phone and only explore sea caves as the tide recedes, ensuring you have ample time to return.

Icons in this guide

Each entry in this book comes with a set of icons that flag features and experiences that are particularly noteworthy for the place being described. Take extra care where the 'danger to life' icon appears and, if possible, hire an experienced local guide.

- Danger to life
- Real tunnels & passages
- Accommodation
- Remote
- Atmospheric
- Ruins
- Caverns & grottoes
- Rural retreat
- Event venue
- Secret hiding places
- Ghost hunts
- Smuggler tales
- Haunted
- Spectacular setting
- Hidden doors
- Treasure stories
- Historical intrigue
- Tunnel lore
- Legend & romance
- Vaults & dungeons



Introduction

Castle Stalker (page 316)

Picture a place where, for centuries, time stood still: a wild, turreted castle with dark legends, buried secrets, and trapdoors so ancient that subterranean air seeps through their gnarled, cracked wood. In flickering candlelight, as you descend into the gloom, it's as if you've stepped into a forgotten tale and are somehow closer to those long gone.

For over 200 years, Gothic writers have frightened us with their fascination for the hidden corners and haunted histories of Europe's ancient locations, reshaping them into a dream-like stage for spectres, betrayal, and doomed romance. Widely accepted to have originated in England with *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), the Gothic literary genre draws its name and inspiration from the Gothic architectural style of the Middle Ages. With its deeply mysterious atmospheres, readers are transported into a world of darkness, danger, and the uncanny.

Freud defined the uncanny as something familiar, or of the home, yet simultaneously strange and unsettling: 'everything that was intended to remain behind closed doors, but has emerged into the open'. This paradox captures the essence of Gothic theory and aesthetics, where the familiar becomes disturbingly unfamiliar.

A descendant of the 18th-century Graveyard School of poetry, one of the genre's defining traits is its ability to create unease and suspense through intricate descriptions of eerie settings. These descriptions immerse readers in a world where ancient castles stand as ominous symbols of decay and secrets lurk behind every shadowy corner. The allure of the Gothic lies also in its exploration of intense emotions, supernatural elements, and psychological depths. Historically marked by a religious—often anti-Catholic—taint, it delves into themes such as madness, obsession, revenge, and the struggle between good and evil.

Through these themes, Gothic fiction captivates readers by tapping into their deepest fears and desires.

Priest holes

Priest holes are hiding places built into many of Britain's principal Roman Catholic houses during the reigns of Elizabeth I (1558–1603) and James I (1603–1625). Some saw later use—around the time of the English Civil War, during the Jacobite Risings (1689–1745), and intermittently throughout the 18th century.

Soon after the accession of Elizabeth I, legal measures against Roman Catholics became increasingly severe, particularly after the Rising of the North and other conspiracies, with the harshest penalties aimed at Jesuits and seminary priests. Those who refused to take the Oath of Supremacy were labelled 'recusants' and faced fines, confiscation of property, and imprisonment. The enforcement of laws against priests and recusants intensified after the Gunpowder Plot during the reign of James I.

While priest holes inspired the secret panels of Gothic romance, most stand in stark contrast to the hidden chambers of fiction and rarely communicate with concealed passages. Indeed, according to historian Michael Hodgetts, priest holes are often unremarkable, typically measuring around 2.5m by 1m, standing at a height of 1.5m, and distinguishable by the flooring at their entrance—often a trapdoor tucked away in a garderobe closet or some other dark corner.

That being said, some—particularly those made by Nicholas Owen—were ingenious. A Jesuit lay brother, Owen worked mainly in the Midlands and built numerous high-quality priest holes, often containing emergency exits and, whenever possible, his hides were linked so they could be used in conjunction with one another. He avoided creating hides along outside walls where they could be detected by measuring discrepancies between exterior and interior dimensions, and often burrowed into solid masonry. Born in Oxford, Owen was probably a carpenter and mason by trade and often travelled under the name 'Little John', a reference to his short stature and one of several aliases. For 17 or so years Owen worked under the



Harvington Hall (page 191)

Jesuit priest Henry Garnet (1555–1606), and his priest holes—for which he was paid in food and lodgings—were in great demand.

For priests, secret hiding places could, quite literally, be the difference between life and death. In their quest to uncover them, state-appointed priest hunters employed a myriad of techniques. Often accompanied by skilled carpenters and masons, they ranged from meticulous measurements and soundings to the physical dismantling of panels and the lifting of floorboards. It was not unusual for a search to extend over many days, with the priest hunter's quarry merely a wall thickness away, enduring the agonies of starvation, confinement, and the constant fear of making a sound that might betray his hiding place. Primary sources on this topic include two works by Jesuit priest John Gerard (1564–1637). His *Narrative* and *Autobiography* offer gripping insights into the dangerous life of a Roman Catholic priest in Elizabethan England and are well worth reading.

Secret chapels

Closely associated with priest holes, secret chapels and oratories allowed Catholics to practise their faith in private. Typically, secret chapels were camouflaged as ordinary rooms within a house. They were usually tucked away in the attic or the upper levels of a building, occasionally featuring a covert entrance such as a hidden staircase. This allowed the priest to slip away discreetly while enabling the faithful to access the chapel directly, bypassing the rest of the house and avoiding suspicion. In certain cases, Catholics went as far as decorating these spaces, as seen at Harvington Hall in Worcestershire (page 191) and the Plas Gunter Mansion in Abergavenny, South Wales.

Secret underground chapels also served as havens for the faithful. While only a handful are known, examples survive at Beer Quarry Caves in Devon (page 73) and Hardwick Dene in County Durham (page 252).

Secret panels & doors

Secret panels have long been a hallmark of Gothic fiction, embodying mystery, daring escapes, and illicit affairs. The story of the Countess of Derby's concealment and discovery at Martindale Castle, as depicted in *Peveril of the Peak*, drew inspiration from a tale shared with Sir Walter Scott by Margaret Swinton, who witnessed the event in her youth.

A certain Mrs Macfarlane startled young Margaret after emerging through a sliding panel in a room at Swinton House in Berwickshire—a secret unknown to the child. She had taken refuge at the border estate after fatally shooting an English government official named John Cayley at her Edinburgh home—possibly in self-defence.

Moveable panels can be found at Chichester Cathedral (page 108) and Michelham Priory (page 110) in West Sussex, at Boughton House in Northamptonshire (page 217), and at Little Moreton Hall in Cheshire (page 234), as well as Clarke Hall and Low Hall in West Yorkshire.

Overbeck's in Devon has a secret door in its staircase



Littlecote House (page 88)



Craggy coves with tales of treasure, pirates and smugglers feature heavily in the rich, dark history of Cornwall and Devon. Scattered along the dramatic coast, quaint villages hold stories of daring escapades and narrow escapes. They tell of moonlit meetings where the salty air was thick with the promise of trade and treachery.

This is also a region steeped in folklore, with haunted caves and sudden mists. The rugged north coast of Cornwall is home to the remains of Tintagel Castle, celebrated as the legendary birthplace of King Arthur and renowned for its mystical cavern below.

North of Bude, near the Devon border, lie the wooded combes and towering cliffs of Morwenstow, full of intrigue. Here, you can follow in the footsteps of Reverend Robert Stephen Hawker and his mischievous smuggler friend, searching for the lost Witan-stone.

Uncover the stories of Penzance inns, share fireside tales, or take a deeper journey back through time and enter Cornwall's Iron Age fogou passages, steeped in mystery.

Ancient houses are always within reach. Nestled in a tranquil valley a short distance from Newquay lies Trerice, an exquisite Elizabethan manor house full of secrets.

Stretching from Land's End to the River Tamar, the southern coastline exudes its own distinctive charm. Here, you can discover tree-lined waterways that meander inland, famously depicted in Daphne du Maurier's novel *Frenchman's Creek*. Long ago, the lush woods surrounding the Fal Estuary inspired the Forest of Morrois in Béroul's 12th-century story of Tristan and Iseult. Today, these woods serve as the backdrop to Trelissick, one of Cornwall's most enchanting country estates.

To the northeast, the wilds of Dartmoor loom like a lost world. Yet the area is also celebrated for its charming villages and tranquil countryside, dotted with legend-rich ruins such as Berry Pomeroy Castle, famed for its White Lady.

Like Cornwall, Devon boasts contrasting coasts with their own unique character. The northern coastline is rugged and unforgiving, shaped by the relentless forces of the Atlantic, while the southern coastline is characterised by sheltered estuaries, lush wooded valleys and notorious smuggling villages such as Holcombe, near Dawlish.

With its magnificent cathedral and characterful buildings, Exeter makes a good base for exploring the region. You can even descend into a subterranean network of vaulted tunnels dating back to medieval times, stretching unseen beneath its historic streets.



annoyed local shepherds that they insisted on exercising their rights by walking straight through it. Old lead and silver mines lie in the surrounding woods, and the well-known Priest's Hole cave is about 1.5 miles to the southwest.

1 mile southwest of Hartsop. OS Explorer OL05 & Landranger 90. NY 398 120, 54.5001, -2.9304, CA11 0NZ

5. Muncaster Castle

Set on a wooded ridge with views of the Western Fells, the ancestral home of the Pennington family is largely a 19th-century castellated mansion. Its medieval past endures in the panelled Great Hall and the 14th-century pele tower, whose 2.7m-thick walls contain a secret passage. Filled with portraits and historic treasures, the castle was largely rebuilt in 1783, then remodelled and enlarged between 1862 and 1866 by Anthony Salvin, who created the barrel-vaulted Drawing Room and the soaring octagonal library—a Gothic retreat rising over two storeys, with a gallery, a secret door and a night sky painted on its vaulted ceiling.

Like Eden Hall, Muncaster Castle has its 'luck': an enamelled glass bowl presented to Sir John Pennington by Henry VI, who was sheltered here in 1463 after his defeat at Hexham. According to tradition, the family will prosper so long as it remains intact.

For those with a taste for mystery, Muncaster does not disappoint. There are regular opportunities to join overnight investigations of the castle's ghostly residents, as well as group 'ghost sits', where the brave can spend a night in its famously haunted Tapestry Room.

1 mile southeast of Ravenglass. CA18 1RQ, muncaster.co.uk

6. Heysham Old Hall

Built around 1598 and occupied by the Edmondson family for much of its early history, this two-storey, gabled Elizabethan house—now a pub—retains mullioned and transomed windows, beamed ceilings, and vast fireplaces, one spanning about 2.7m. Later a tenanted farm, it was renovated in 1888 under the Reverend Charles Royds, Rector of Heysham. During this work, a concealed opening was found in the floor of the west wing. It linked to the left chimney-breast of the great fireplace and to the interior of a buttress, giving access to a hidden stairway leading to the attics. It is also said to have communicated with an underground passage running into the grounds.

Heysham Road, Heysham, LA3 2RT, oldhallheysham.co.uk

7. Speke Hall

Ghost hunter Peter Underwood described Speke Hall as an intriguing and haunted black-and-white house in which 'there was once a maze of priest's hiding places, escape tunnels, concealed staircases, secret doors, listening holes and look-outs'.

This half-timbered manor house was the seat of the Roman Catholic Norris family. Standing on an old moated site beside the River Mersey, the present building is arranged around four sides of a cobbled courtyard.

The T-shaped Great Hall rises to the roof and is adorned with carvings, antlers, paintings and suits of armour. At its western end, 'The Great Wainscot' incorporates fine pilasters and Flemish Renaissance-style carved heads. In the adjoining Great Parlour, the early Jacobean plaster ceiling is decorated with fruits, vines and roses.

Speke was likely begun by Sir William



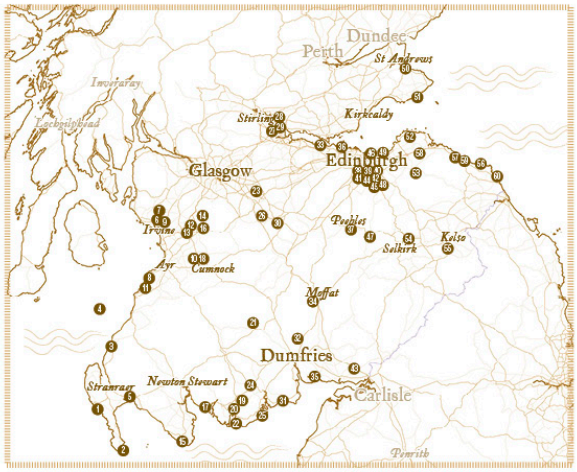
1. Dunskey Castle

Perched on cliffs above the Irish Sea, this rugged ruin was the stronghold of the Adairs of Kinhilt, with the first mention of a fortress here dating back to 1330. The oldest parts of the present castle date to the early 16th century, following the destruction of its predecessor by the McCullochs of Myrton and Cardoness.

The main structure is a substantial L-plan tower, complemented by a later long gallery extending to the northwest. Vaulted cellars occupy the ground floor; the principal public rooms are on the first floor, and private chambers lie above. The northernmost cellar in the main building was intended for access solely from the courtyard, possibly serving as stabling. Two dark, unlit rooms on the ground floor may have had a more ominous function.

Legend speaks of a hidden passage running from the castle dungeons to a sea cave tucked into a steep, narrow cleft in the cliffs to the southeast. 'Under this house, in the rock, is a cave, which, they say, goes a considerable distance under ground, but we had not opportunity to search into it', wrote Yorkshireman Thomas Kirk during a tour of Scotland in 1677. This cave is said to be accessible only at low tide or by boat, though the approach is fraught with danger.

The castle and cave have their own version of the ubiquitous piper legend, said to date from the 14th century when Walter de Curry, a notorious sea-pirate, occupied the earlier fortress. Angered by the insolence of his Irish piper, de Curry condemned him to a slow death by starvation in the castle's dungeons. According to tradition, the piper attempted to escape via the secret passages beneath the castle but perished. His restless spirit is said to roam the tunnels to this day, filling them with the haunting melodies of his pipes.





The castle is also said to have harboured a brownie—or 'hairy man'—and to be haunted by the ghost of a nursemaid who accidentally dropped a baby from one of the windows onto the cliffs below.

0.5 miles south of Portpatrick. OS Explorer 309 & Landranger 82, NX 003 533, 54.8354, -5.1097, DG9 9AA

2. St Medan's Cave & Chapel

This small raised-sea cave, from which a medieval chapel was built, lies in a wild spot on the face of a cliff. Although the identity of St Medan remains uncertain, folklore often portrays her as an early-medieval Irish holy woman who embraced Christianity. To the southeast of the cave, three circular rock pools are thought to have served as healing wells.

1 mile southeast of Colmgean. OS Explorer 309 & Landranger 82, NX 143 315, 54.6451, -4.8783, DG9 9HP

3. Sawney Bean's Cave

It is said that centuries ago Sawney Bean and his family spent many years robbing, killing, and eating travellers. Their reign of terror supposedly ended when one of their victims escaped and alerted the authorities to their cave hideout. Sadly, there is no evidence supporting the existence of Sawney Bean; the story is widely regarded as a myth, with its association to this raised sea cave stemming from Samuel Crockett's romance *The Grey Man* (1896).

To the south lies Bennane Cave, also known as Snib's Cave, its entrance marked by a mortared masonry wall. Inside, the remains of a blocked window and a fireplace are still visible. The cave is divided into two chambers by stone walls and has likely been used for centuries. Its last known inhabitant was Henry Ewing Torbet, a trained accountant who lived as a hermit here for several decades until his death in 1983.

Sawney Bean's Cave: 3.5 miles northeast of Ballantrae. OS Explorer 317 & Landranger 76, NX 099 876, 55.1462, -4.9840, KA26 0JJ

Snib's Cave: 2.4 miles northeast of Ballantrae. OS Explorer 317 & Landranger 76, NX 091 862, 55.1333, -4.9952, KA26 0LE

child were discovered during the removal of a spiral staircase from one of the corner towers, and these bones are now displayed in a glass case. Their origins remain a mystery, with no legend or historical account to explain them.

The castle is rumoured to be haunted, possibly by Lady Margaret Duff, the wife of Lord James Brodie. In 1786, she fell asleep by the fire in the Green Bedroom, or Best Bedchamber, where her clothes caught alight and she burned to death. Her smiling portrait hangs in the Dining Room below, one hand raised in a gesture that seems to point toward the room where she met her fate.

3.3 miles southwest of Forres. IV36 2TE, nts.org.uk/visit/places/brodie-castle

5. Ossian's Hall

Pools, waterfalls, and rapids cascade through the conifer woods of Craigvinean Forest—where the 18th-century follies of the Dukes of Atholl can be found. A highlight is Ossian's Hall, a folly featuring sliding panels, a hidden handle, and mirrored artwork offering dramatic views of the Black Linn Falls.

Named after the legendary bard of the poems attributed to Ossian, the Hall was constructed in 1782 to replace an earlier summerhouse. Its exterior was redesigned to resemble a small circular temple, while the interior boasted a lavish drawing room adorned with intricate plasterwork, paintings, and mirrors. Upon entering, guests first encountered a circular antechamber dominated by a large painting of Ossian. A secret pulley mechanism allowed the painting to slide away, revealing a bright inner chamber. Here, the sound of rushing water, enhanced by the Hall's acoustics, enveloped visitors, while mirrors on the walls and ceiling created the illusion of water flowing from every direction.

In 1869 the Hall was damaged by a gunpowder explosion, likely in protest against the tolls imposed by the 7th Duke of Atholl on the nearby Dunkeld Bridge. After repairs, the original painting of Ossian was replaced with a portrait of William Duff, affectionately known as 'Beardy Willie', a local ghillie favoured by Queen Victoria. By the early 20th century, however, the building had fallen into disrepair, and in 1951 it was restored in a simplified form.

A major conservation project in 2007 stabilised the structure and reintroduced elements of theatrical surprise, echoing the spirit of the original design.

14 miles southwest of Dunkeld. PH8 0JR, nts.org.uk/visit/places/the-hermitage/highlights/ossians-hall

6. Huntingtower Castle

Once known as Ruthven, Huntingtower Castle is famous for the Gowrie Conspiracy, when the young King James VI was captured and held here for 10 months. After a second conspiracy that resulted in the execution of the Earl of Gowrie, the castle was taken by the Crown and renamed.

The original eastern tower was a standalone structure with three floors and an attic. Near the end of the 15th century, a second tower was built to the west, about 3m away. This L-shaped tower was connected to Huntingtower by a wooden bridge located just below the battlements. The arrangement was probably defensive: If one tower came under attack, occupants could flee to the other and pull up the bridge. In the late 17th century, the space between the two towers was finally built over.

Inside, visitors can see a beautifully painted ceiling from the 1540s and many other notable features. One of the most unusual is a secret hiding place that once protected Ruthven treasures—a cupboard concealed inside another cupboard, hidden behind a stone.

The castle is said to be haunted by Lady Greensleeves, the daughter of the 1st Earl of Gowrie. Legend claims she fell in love with a servant, and the pair would meet in the eastern tower. Some stories say they ran away together; others suggest a tragic end, with the young woman falling between the towers. Although there are no historical records to support the tale, many visitors have reported seeing a tall woman in a green silk gown.

Northwest Perth. PH1 3JL, historicenvironment.scot/visit-a-place/places/huntingtower-castle/



7. Covesea Caves

Covesea Caves (pronounced Cow-see) are a group of sandstone caves situated along the southern shore of the Moray Firth, the most spectacular of which is Giant's Dome, located near the centre of the series. The most westerly of the Covesea caves, known as Gypsies' Cave or Hall's Hole, is a raised sea cave in Clashach Cove. Legend says that a hidden passage once ran from this cave to the workshop of Sir Robert Gordon (1647–1704), the famed Wizard of Gordonstoun (page 292), or even a damp dungeon beneath Duffus Castle.

Towards the eastern end of the series is a cave known as Sir Robert's Stable, where it is said that during the Jacobite troubles Sir Robert kept his horses. Some accounts suggest it was also used for smuggling, with the laird stabling his horses there while secretly meeting his French and Dutch business partners. The entrance was intentionally sealed, leaving only a small doorway with a peephole above, allowing those inside to monitor any approaching threats—only the remnants of the old door frame remain today. Legend has it that a hidden passage once connected this cave to Gordonstoun House, a mile to the south.

The Sculptor's Cave, which has a double