

# A love story, a mystery

## Who were those eloping lovers?

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Text and photo by Jeff Heinrich  
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What's a love story without a happy surprise – maybe even an elopement?

I got to witness both on an unusual trip our family made to the United Kingdom last July – unusual for several reasons. First, because we were a large, multigenerational group: my family of four, my middle brother and his family of four, and our parents. Second, because the reason for the trip was that my eldest brother, after three decades as a globe-trotting bachelor, was finally getting married – in England, our mother's homeland. Third, because near the end of our two-week tour we ended up in a historic little place called Gretna Green.

I didn't know anything about Gretna Green until my mom told me how famous it is. "Oh yes," she said, as we took the exit off the A74 motorway, just across the border into southern Scotland. "I'm surprised you've never heard of it."

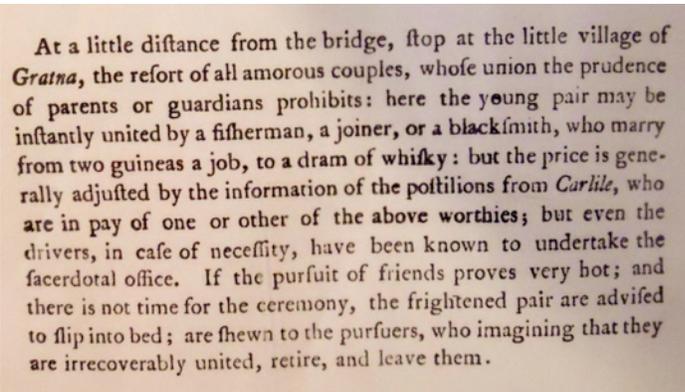
I'd only planned this side trip as an excuse to see a bit of Scotland and buy some souvenir whisky before heading home. We'd been renting a cottage in England's nearby Lake District and had spent the morning on an outing up by the Scottish border to see Hadrian's Wall. Now half our party was heading back to Cumbria to do some mountain biking, while we – after an aborted attempt to see the castle in Carlisle (too many stairs for my dad) – were going to Gretna Green.

We pulled up at a mall named after its main attraction, the Old Blacksmiths Shop. I headed through the arcade, bought some Springbank single malt at a whisky outlet, then took my mom and my teenage daughter to the old smithy. Since the early 1800s, underage couples (or sometimes grown men and adolescent girls)



A study in contrasts: My mom and I witness the civil-marriage ceremony of an eloping couple from Utah we called Ken & Barbie, at the Old Blacksmiths Shop in Gretna Green, Scotland.

had come here to get married, a practice allowed under Scottish law but not British. Blacksmiths were "anvil priests" sanctioned by the state to perform the ceremony. If you wanted to get married without your parents' consent, Gretna Green was the place. "I am going to Gretna Green, and if you cannot guess with



who, I shall think you a simpleton,"

a headstrong teenager writes a friend in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), before eloping up to the border with a dashing military officer.

Today, instead of a blacksmith, a state official does the honours and the rules are tighter. There's now a two-week waiting period to discourage spur-of-the-moment weddings. But any couple who are both single and 16 or older (and of the opposite sex) can get married

A page from an 1870 guidebook at the museum encourages travellers to "stop at the little village of Gratna, the resort of all amorous couples, whose union the prudence of parents or guardians prohibit."

at Gretna Green, as long as they have two witnesses – easier done than in England, where you have to be 18 to marry without parental approval. "A Gretna Green marriage" is now part of popular lore, and thousands of people – including many foreigners – do it every year. Louis de Funès set some scenes there in his 1967 movie comedy *Les grandes vacances*. The place has also been written into the plot lines of popular British TV series like *EastEnders* (teenage boy weds teenage girl) and *Waterloo Road* (lady teacher elopes with male student).

We toured the little museum at the Blacksmiths, and on our way out were asked by one of the operators if we could stay behind for a bit. "We have a couple here from the United States and they don't have any witnesses," she said. "Would you mind standing in for the ceremony at 3 o'clock?" My mom and I thought this could be fun, so we said okay; my daughter, only 15, didn't qualify, but filmed the proceedings. We took our places on either side of the anvil in the smithy, and to the sound of bagpipes, in walked the Americans. My first thought was "Ken and Barbie." They were a perfectly coiffed, well-dressed couple in their 40s who turned out to be from Utah – "but we're not Mormons," the bride told me later. They'd chosen Gretna Green for sentimental reasons (her ancestors were Scottish) and practical ones, too ("We needed to elope").

A tiny woman who looked and sounded like a miniature Helen Mirren officiated. She introduced herself and said in a soft lilt: "I'm an assistant registrar, appointed by the general registrar of Scotland, and I'm here today to solemnize your marriage." She reminded the couple that their vows would be legally binding. Ken

and Barbie faced each other, held hands, and repeated after Helen. The bride winked to the groom as she said her full name. Next to the perfect couple, my mom and I felt a bit self-conscious. My mom looked fine enough in sandy-



A photo-op after the wedding

coloured slacks and sweater, but I looked decidedly uncouth in my faded jeans and bright pink T-shirt from a Haitian eatery in Miami.

On the anvil in front of them, the couple's wedding rings glistened in the spotlights. Bride and groom then placed the rings on each other's ring finger. They kissed. A burly man came in to strike a blow on the anvil to signal that the couple were wed. They signed the register and everyone posed for photos. My mom and I had to

sign the register too, and Ms. Mirren made sure we spelled out our complete names and addresses, "because this is a legal document," not to be taken lightly. The couple posed for more pictures in the museum's carriage room and signed a souvenir postcard for us: a vintage reproduction of an Old Blacksmiths Shop wedding certificate. Then we took our leave.

When we got back to Canada, I looked the couple up online, trying to figure out who they were and why they'd eloped. The groom had an unusual name and came up quickly in a search: he was a widower whose wife had died a few years back at the young age of 40 – exactly how, the death notice did not say. "Barbie" owned a photo gallery – at least, a Utah woman with the same name did; the picture on the website wasn't the woman at Gretna Green, but someone much older. Double mystery. How had the groom's first wife died? What had his new bride meant by that wink at the altar?



And one last smooch before hitting the road ...

I'll respect their privacy and not probe any further. But my mom and daughter and I will always have that unusual memory to share: the day we were lassoed on foreign soil into a ceremony for people we'd never met and would never know and will probably never see again.

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