

# The Landmark Trust

## COLLEGEHILL HOUSE, ROSLIN, NR. EDINBURGH

Rosslyn (the village is spelt Roslin) is famous for three things - an ancient castle, its extraordinary chapel and a valley full of scenic romance. At the heart of these three stands Collegehill House. In the words of Sir Walter Scott, "A morning of leisure can scarcely be anywhere more delightfully spent than in the woods of Rosslyn". There has probably always been some form of fortification on the site of Rosslyn Castle, an almost insulated rock overhanging the glen of the Esk - certainly since at least the beginning of the 14th century, and maybe much earlier. William de St Clair, who came from Normandy with William the Conqueror, obtained from Malcolm Canmore a great part of the lands of the barony of Roslin, and he may well have built some sort of edifice on his new possessions.

The present castle, owned by the Earl of Rosslyn, dates from various periods after suffering a chequered history, but the earliest standing part is the remains of the tower by the present bridge. This was probably built shortly after the Battle of Rosslyn in 1302. This crushing defeat of the English involved a small Scottish army fighting three battles against different English forces all on the same day; the first contest took place on the Bilston Burn, and the second and third between Dryden and Hawthornden. Local names perpetuate the sites: Shin-bones Field, where bones have been found when ploughing; the 'Hewings', where there was great slaughter; and the 'Killburn', a stream that ran red for three days.

Collegehill House came later, and any famous travellers have found rest here, formerly known as Roslin Inn. The name 'Collegehill' refers to the fact that the chapel was built as a collegiate chapel, whose priests were to pray for the soul of its founder. Thanks to this position hard by Rosslyn Chapel, the keepers of the inn were, through the centuries, de facto curators of the chapel, which represents one of the finest expositions of the work of Renaissance stonemasons in Europe. Begun in 1446, the chapel was a picturesque ruin for much of its life: desecrated during the Reformation, Cromwellians stabled their horses there in 1650 and it was again attacked by a mob in an upsurge of antipathy towards Catholics in 1688. None of this prevented the Roslin glen and its surrounds from gaining its reputation as a romantic and picturesque destination for tourists and the Roslin Inn seems to have been built expressly as an inn, in 1660 according to its datestone. While not a grand building, it is well-built, to a standard that might be expected of a minor laird's house and in keeping with the pedigree of the St Clair estate on which it stood. Its walls include carefully dressed sandstone blocks, which may well have come from Rosslyn Castle, sleighted by the Parliamentarians in 1650.

Visitors to Collegehill House and Rosslyn Chapel today have some eminent predecessors. Ben Johnson visited the chapel on foot in 1618, to find William Drummond of Hawthornden resting under a tree: 'Welcome, welcome, ye royal Ben', said Drummond, to which Johnson replied with quicker wit than style, 'Thank 'ee, thank 'ee, Hawthornden.' After an all-night session in Edinburgh in 1787, Robbie Burns walked out to watch the dawn at Rosslyn with his friend James Nasmyth and then found a welcome breakfast at the Inn. He left his thanks in the form of a ditty scratched on a pewter plate. (When Queen Victoria visited with her seventeen year old son in 1859, he left his mark on the Inn by scratching his name on a window pane - his writing verified by his son, George V, who visited ninety years later). And James Boswell and Dr. Johnson lingered so long that they were late for their next appointment when they visited during their Tour of Scotland in 1773. Francis Grose, J M W Turner and the Wordsworths - all came to pay homage to this romantic spot.

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The innkeepers who also acted as gatekeepers and curators of the Chapel were in some instances hardly less colourful than their visitors. Annie Wilson holds a particular place, having kept house at the inn first with her husband and then as a widow for some forty years. She had a set patter that she never varied, as she showed visitors around the chapel, pointing out features of interest with a long stick. A reporter from The Gentleman's Magazine immortalised her nutcracker profile and purposeful demeanour in a sketch published in 1817.

The building ceased to be an inn in 1863, when the name Roslin Inn passed to an establishment in the village. It became known instead by the grander name of Collegehill House, in keeping with its new role as home for the Earl of Rosslyn's factor, John Thomson. He was a Freemason and during his tenure and beyond, the Roslin Lodge met in the first floor sitting room at Collegehill. In the twentieth century, the Taylor family took over as chapel custodians for three generations. In the 1940s and 50s, Collegehill House again opened its doors to guests, becoming a tearoom famed for its cakes under Dorothy Taylor, helped by her daughters Evelyn and Dorothy. The last curator, Judith Fiskin, left the house after fifteen years there in 1996. When the Rosslyn Chapel Trust was founded in 1997, the position of curator was largely superseded by the Visitor Centre there, and the appointment ceased.

The structure of Collegehill House evolved through three main phases. The original T-plan is primary, probably contemporary with the 1660 datestone above the front door. After minor modifications in the early eighteenth century, major remodelling then followed c.1760-70 when a new rear wing was constructed and the interiors reorganised. This perhaps reflects increased trade as tourist interest heightened in such picturesque sites. Then around 1790 –1810 the east wing was added. Minor works seem to have taken place when it became the factor's house, with the front entrance remodelled and some windows replaced.

In 1986, the south wall of the room at the east end of the house (now the Landmark kitchen) collapsed, probably due to a local earth tremor, and the north wall also had to be shored up. Repairs were undertaken then by the architects Simpson & Brown of Edinburgh, who have also had a long involvement with the chapel. With the foundation of the Chapel Trust, the estate was keen to ensure that Collegehill House not only had assured maintenance for the future, but also that its very special setting should be enjoyed by as many as possible. To this end, Landmark agreed to take the building on and its conversion and refurbishment were once more handled on the Rosslyn's behalf by Simpson and Brown.

Throughout its history, Collegehill House has been owned by the Earls of Rosslyn, on whose behalf the Landmark Trust also lets Rosslyn Castle. It seems fitting that this honest, welcoming building is once more offering hospitality to visitors. Since its appropriation for the fictitious climax of the Da Vinci Code, Rosslyn Chapel's fame has increased still further and it has become a thriving tourist attraction. In the lovely first floor sitting room at the rear of Collegehill House, however, you can enjoy a private, grandstand view of this glorious flowering of the mason's craft over the garden wall.

*The Landmark Trust is a building preservation charity that rescues historic buildings at risk and lets them for holidays. Collegehill House sleeps up to 6 people. To book the building or any other Landmark property for a holiday, please visit [www.landmarktrust.org.uk](http://www.landmarktrust.org.uk) or contact the Booking Office on 01628 825 925.*