

Greyfriars Bobby

Posted by Peter on 29 September 2011



Tourists from all over the world come to be photographed beside the statue of Greyfriars Bobby, outside Greyfriars Church in Edinburgh.

In the podcast today, we will talk about “fact” and “fiction”. A “fact” is something which is true; something which I, or someone else, can prove to be true. For instance, it is a fact that the earth is round.

And “fiction” is the opposite of fact. It means something which is invented, something which is [made up](#) something which comes from the imagination. In a bookshop, you will find a section called “fiction”. This is where you can buy novels, books of short stories and so on. Another section of the bookshop will be called “non-fiction”. This is where you can buy [biographies](#), and books about cooking or gardening, books to help you play golf better, and books about learning

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English.

Now lets go to Edinburgh, the capital city of Scotland. Edinburgh is an old and beautiful city, full of fascinating places to visit. One of these is a church called [Greyfriars Kirk](#). "Kirk" is a Scottish word for "church". The church is built on land which was once a [Franciscan monastery](#). The Franciscan monks wore grey clothing, hence the name "Greyfriars". Greyfriars Kirk played an important part in the history of Scotland in the 17th century, and was a centre for [Protestant](#) opposition to the king. However, the reason that thousands of people visit Greyfriars Kirk every year has nothing to do with 17th century history. No, the visitors come to see a little statue of a dog, called Greyfriars Bobby.

Bobby belonged to a man called John Gray (or "auld Jock" as he was commonly known.) Auld Jock was a [night watchman](#), and Bobby went with him everywhere. Then, in 1858 Auld Jock died of tuberculosis. He was buried in the churchyard of Greyfriars Kirk. For the next 14 years, Bobby sat beside his master's grave waiting for him to return, until at last in 1872 Bobby himself died. Soon after that, a wealthy lady paid for a statue to [commemorate](#) the dog, and tourists have come to visit the place ever since. There have been books and a [film](#) about Greyfriars Bobby, and in Edinburgh you can buy all sorts of Greyfriars Bobby souvenirs. Bobby is indeed one of the most famous dogs in the world.

What do you think about this story? Perhaps you find the story of Greyfriars Bobby very [moving](#). Perhaps there are tears running down your cheeks as you think of the poor little dog waiting for his master who never returned. Or perhaps you are thinking, "What a stupid dog! Why didn't he go away and chase cats or chew bones or do other things that make a dog happy?"

Or perhaps you are wondering, "Is the story of Greyfriars Bobby true? Is it fact or fiction?"

Unfortunately for the tourist industry of Edinburgh, there are reasons to think that it may be fiction. Jan Bondeson of Cardiff University has recently published a book about Greyfriars Bobby. Jan thinks that Bobby was a [stray](#) dog and that the man who looked after the graveyard invented the story about Bobby sitting beside his master's grave. People in 19th century Britain were often rather [sentimental](#), and a stories like Greyfriars Bobby appealed to them. The man who looked after the churchyard used to tell the story to visitors, and the visitors would put their hands in their pockets and pull out a few coins to give to him. The owner of a nearby restaurant and other local businessmen helped to spread the story, in order to encourage more visitors to come. When the original "Bobby" died (probably in 1867), they even found another dog to take his place. In other words, Mr Bondeson thinks that the story of Greyfriars Bobby was a publicity [stunt](#) by the Edinburgh tourist industry.

So, fact or fiction? I cannot possibly say what I think. Scottish history is full of romantic stories. Wealthy American tourists who imagine that they have Scottish ancestors believe these stories - all of them. The Scottish tourist industry depends on them. It is one of the unwritten laws of our country that English people like me are not allowed to say that a Scottish story, no matter how [implausible](#), is not true. So, if you want to believe that Greyfriars Bobby sat for 14 years beside his master's grave, you can believe it. I am not going to stop you.

This is the text of the podcast at <http://www.listen-to-english.com/index.php?id=566>.