



A-Z of Scottish History - U is for Unicorn!

We are exploring Scotland's connection with the mythical, horned horse, the unicorn! Way back in the fifteenth century, when James I (not to be confused with James VI who was known as James I in England!) was ruling Scotland, the unicorn was chosen as the animal to represent the Scots. Why choose an animal that doesn't actually exist, I hear you ask! Well, no one really knows why!

It is largely believed that the unicorn was chosen as it is the natural enemy of the lion, England's national animal, however, this has since been debunked, as the idea of the two animals being enemies only really developed after the joining of the crowns in 1603.

Belief in this enigmatic creature dates all the way back to the Ancient Greeks when classical historian Ctesias mentioned the horse-like quadrupeds in his book about India, Indica, where he described an unusual animal, like a 'wild ass', with a horn sprouting from its temple. The unicorn then pops up in the Old Testament and the Quran.

The unicorn appeared first in Scotland way back in the 12th century, on the royal coat of arms of William I, aka William the Lion. Legend claimed that only a king could hold a unicorn captive due to the animal's strength and the danger it posed. Now, it makes sense that this legend attracted the attention of James I, who spent eighteen years of his adolescent life held hostage by King Henry IV of England in Windsor Castle. The unicorn soon became a symbol of purity and strength and was adopted by James I and the monarchs who followed him as a representation of their rule. James III emblazoned gold coins with the image of the unicorn, with his son, James IV, and grandson, James V, following suit. It wasn't long until the unicorn was adopted as Scotland's national animal.



Recreation of the Unicorn Tapestries at Stirling Castle

Similar to the thistle, you can see reminders of the importance of the unicorn to the Scot's in our heraldic crests, engravings, gold coins, royal seals, wall panels, coats of arms, tombs and tapestries. Speaking of tapestries, Stirling Castle has an impressive set of seven hand-woven tapestries decorating the walls of the Queen's personal chambers, in the royal palace. Inspired by the famous *Hunt of the Unicorn* series which was created in the 1500s in the low countries (known today as the Netherlands), and are now displayed in the Metropolitan Museum in New York. James V had a set of similar tapestries known as the *History of the Life of the Unicorn* which were believed to have been created between 1495 and 1505. The project took 13 years to complete due to the mediaeval methods that were employed to create them.

In Scotland, we are known for our love of mythical creatures, from giant loch monsters to fairies and kelpies, but none capture our imagination quite like the unicorn. Celebrated on Scottish monuments, castles, palaces, churches, towers and city walls, it is hard to wander through Scotland's ancient streets without being greeted by a regal unicorn, or two.



Scottish unicorn, flag and shield carved at [Holyrood Palace](#), Edinburgh