



## From Elgin to LA and back again

Kevin McKidd won worldwide fame with *Grey's Anatomy*, but the actor is holding on to his roots, swapping Hollywood for Moray as often as he can

WORDS KEVIN McKIDD

**A**s a kid I was always up to no good and frequently in trouble with the police, so I couldn't in my wildest dreams have imagined that 25 years later I would be living the dream as an actor in Los Angeles, starring in one of the world's most popular television dramas.

I'm a proud Scot and my roots are firmly planted in the Moray town of Elgin and its surroundings. My grandfather was originally a farmer in the Lossiemouth area. My mum was born and bred in the village of Alves, then her family moved to Keith. They eventually settled in Elgin – where I was born and grew up – after my grandfather got a job in Cooper Park in the town.

I went to Seafield Primary School, which was only a five-minute walk from our house. I don't think it has changed a bit since I was there – they're still using those old 'temporary' huts. But I remember it was a great school, with great teachers. One in particular stands out – if it wasn't for Miss Weir, I don't know what would have become of me.

**Above:** Kevin McKidd has found fame and fortune in his adopted home of Los Angeles. **Right:** Elgin has been a royal burgh since the 12th century.



RIGHT - ROB VIERHOEVEN

## TEN THINGS TO DO AND SEE IN MORAY AND BANFFSHIRE

### SCOTTISH DOLPHIN CENTRE



The Scottish Dolphin Centre sits at the mouth of the River Spey, right at the heart of a reserve in an area that's rich in wildlife. Bottlenose dolphins can often be spotted, ospreys return every year, and otters and seals are regular visitors.

### SCOTTISH TRADITIONAL BOAT FESTIVAL



The annual celebration of all things maritime is held this year on 2 and 3 July. Traditional boats from near and far will gather in the historic harbour of Portsoy, giving visitors the chance to learn all about boatbuilding and sailing.

### DUFF HOUSE



Built between 1735 and 1740 to a design by William Adam, Duff House in Banff is home to fabulous works of art and furniture owned by the National Galleries of Scotland. Open from April to October. It also has gorgeous woodland walks.

### BRODIE CASTLE



Four miles west of Forres and famous for its stunning spring daffodils, Brodie Castle was built in 1567 and boasts a magnificent art collection. The gardens, woodlands and nature trail are also worth visiting.

### ELGIN CATHEDRAL



The beautiful medieval Elgin Cathedral may be a magnificent ruin, but it includes the country's finest octagonal chapter house. A 5m-high gravestone, Scotland's tallest, can be seen in the south aisle. Don't miss the Biblical Garden next door.

### MACDUFF MARINE AQUARIUM



Unless you're a Scuba diver, you'll never have a better chance to see hundreds of different kinds of fish than at the Macduff aquarium. The underwater world of the kelp reef, the only one of its kind in Britain, will have you literally holding your breath!

### PLUSCARDEN ABBEY



Founded in 1230 by Alexander II, the beautiful Pluscarden Abbey is still inhabited by monks. The glorious architecture and restful atmosphere of devotion, just six miles from Elgin, are truly memorable.

### BALLINDALLOCH CASTLE



Known as the Pearl of the North, Ballinalloch is set in magnificent grounds between the River Spey and the River Avon. It was built in the 16th century for the Macpherson-Grant family, and is still owned by the same family.

### EAST GRANGE MULTI-ACTIVITY CENTRE



East Grange Multi-Activity Centre, on a farm near Kinloss, offers a range of exciting activities such as river-rafting, quad-biking, karting and laser combat tag. Its Loft live music venue and bistro are also worth a visit.

### BANFF MUSEUM



One of Scotland's oldest museums, Banff Museum was founded in 1828 and contains a wealth of information about the history of the town, along with scientific instruments belonging to the astronomer James Ferguson.



I was a bit of a tearaway in the early days, and I probably hung out with the wrong crowd. We were always up to something. I remember once breaking into an abandoned stately home. It used to be a school or something; it's now the luxury Mansion House Hotel. Anyway, the police were called and chased us off.

Another time I was hanging out with a bunch of older kids. It was a really hot summer and we were messing about in a field next to the wood near my house. We rolled a large bale of hay into the wood, where some of the older boys set light to it. But because everything was bone dry the whole wood went up in flames. The fire brigade were called and this time we were collared by the police.

It was around this time that I started a drama class at the local youth theatre. It was definitely the best thing for me; it kind of straightened me out and got me on a healthier path. And then there was a watershed that lots of people have in their lives: for me it was a trip to Iona.

The furthest I'd ever been from Elgin before was Butlins in Ayr, which had felt like a really big trip. I also remember a hot summer in the 1970s when we went to the Silver Sands Caravan Park in Lossiemouth. It was only a five-minute drive from home, but, playing on the beach in the sun, it felt like we were a million miles away.

When I was in Primary 7, my teacher was Miss Weir, the best teacher I ever had, and it was her who encouraged me to get into amateur

dramatics. She loved Iona, and we did a big project on the island which culminated in a five-day trip to see it for ourselves. Something about those five days really changed me, broadened my horizons. It was a huge point in my life. In fact, I named my daughter Iona, and I go back there as often as I can.

After that I knuckled down at school and ended up going to Edinburgh University to study engineering. Edinburgh felt like a massive city and it was a daunting time. I remember my parents dropped me off at these really horrible digs and I was really depressed. Luckily my best friend from Elgin, Jamie Rae, was already in the city and he hooked me up with a decent flat.

I didn't last long in engineering. I joined the Bedlam Theatre group and it became clear that acting was what I wanted to do, so I got a place doing drama at Queen Margaret College.

I got my first break in 1996 in a film called *Small Faces*. While it was being made, Danny Boyle was casting for his film, *Trainspotting*. He saw my face on the screen and said, 'Who is that guy?' If it hadn't been for *Small Faces* I wouldn't be in LA, though to the rest of the world *Trainspotting* was my big break.

'Elgin feels so familiar. Coming back is like putting on an old pair of jeans'

**Above:** Duffus Castle, near Elgin, is a popular tourist attraction – Kevin took his children there on a recent visit to Scotland. **Below:** Beach huts at Findhorn.





### TEN FACTS ABOUT MORAY AND BANFF

Moray is home to RAF Lossiemouth and RAF Kinloss, which closed recently after the Nimrod aircraft was cancelled

**The Picts occupied the area until the ninth century**

Moray is the spot where the three witches from Shakespeare's *Macbeth* gathered

**General Jose San Martin, liberator of Argentina, spent most of his exile in Banff**

Moray has the only Malt Whisky Trail in the world

**Cullen gave its name to the Cullen Skink, a very rare species of lizard found only in the countryside around the town**

Between 1890 and 1975 Banff was a local government county with its own county council

**Duncan I, king of Scotland, was killed in Elgin on 14 August 1040**

Moray is home to the Findhorn Foundation, a spiritual community and ecovillage founded in 1962

**During the English Revolution in the 1600s, Banff was a royalist stronghold**



**'My parents are very good at reinforcing the family folklore over tea and biscuits'**

I was lucky enough to make a living as an actor in Britain, but when the opportunity to work in America came up, I grabbed it. It was to do a show called *Journeyman*, but, like many dramas there, it was cancelled because the ratings weren't high enough. Shows in the States need to be instant smash hits in order to stay on air.

I don't see myself as a Scottish actor, rather as an actor who happens to be Scottish. You can limit yourself otherwise. It's crucial as an actor to be able to cast your net as wide as possible in terms of parts you can play. Having said that, Americans find Scottish accents charming and it can open a few doors: well, the door that opened for me was massive.

I was out of work, the scriptwriters were on strike and I was in a rented house with my family, wondering what the hell I was doing in LA when, out of the blue, Shonda Rhimes, creator of *Grey's Anatomy*, asked me to audition for a new part, which I got. Basically my numbers came up. *Grey's Anatomy* is the most popular drama in America. It's a really big deal.

I live in LA full-time at the moment and I love it. Americans seem to love the Scottish attitude and those with Scottish ancestry are fiercely proud of it. There is a brilliant Highland Games near to where we live that we go to: a

massive Americanised version in the sunshine.

Although I enjoy life in America, I go back to Elgin as much as possible. We usually spend a bit of the summer and Christmas here with my family. Elgin is what I know and what is most familiar to me. Coming back is like putting on an old pair of jeans. When I go to the pub I hear a lot of the people complaining that nothing has changed, but I take comfort from that.

Another reason we make such an effort to come back often is so the kids can learn about their roots. They love sitting with their aunts and uncles with cups of tea and biscuits, and my parents are very good at reinforcing the family folklore, telling stories from the old days.

My uncle used to be in the merchant navy and when he eventually moved back to Elgin my dad asked him why, having been all over the world, he chose Elgin. His reply was: 'It's an awful nice place to come back to.' And he's right. Elgin is steeped in history, with an amazing medieval cathedral, and all you need to know about the history of the area can be found in the Elgin Museum. Cooper Park is a great place to go. It has a lovely pond and amazing trees.

Beyond Elgin there are loads of things to

**Top:** Visiting Iona was a turning point in the young tearaway's life. **Inset:** Kevin with his dad and grandad.



## FIELDFACTS

## MORAY AND BANFFSHIRE

Dominating the north-east corner of Scotland, the region includes towns such as Cullen, Elgin, Forres and Huntly. It covers about 860 square miles, from the Cairngorms to the Moray Firth. Its rivers, such as the Spey and the Findhorn, attract fishermen from all over the world, as does its magnificent coastline and fishing ports such as Buckie. Speyside is famous for its whisky, thanks to pure water and good barley.



The Banffshire coast is renowned for its natural beauty and for the whales, dolphins, gannets and puffins that live there. Its towns and ports are proud of their connection with the sea – you'll find a marine aquarium at Macduff and a wonderful celebration of traditional boatbuilding skills at Portsoy. The coast enjoys its own microclimate, which is warmer and drier than normal thanks to the mellowing effects of the Grampian mountains and the North Atlantic drift. With some of Scotland's most dramatic castles and country houses, the whole region is rich in history.

## DIRECTORY

<b>Crannoch Hotel</b> 01542 840210 <a href="http://www.crannochhotel.co.uk">www.crannochhotel.co.uk</a>	<b>Elgin Museum</b> 01343 543675 <a href="http://www.elginmuseum.org.uk">www.elginmuseum.org.uk</a>
<b>Seafield Arms Hotel</b> 01542 840791 <a href="http://www.theseafieldhotel.com">www.theseafieldhotel.com</a>	<b>Speyside Coopage</b> 01340 871108 <a href="http://www.speysidecoopage.co.uk">www.speysidecoopage.co.uk</a>
<b>Discovering Scotland</b> 07703 632 173 <a href="http://www.discovering-scotland.co.uk">www.discovering-scotland.co.uk</a>	<b>Walter Gerrard &amp; Co Solicitors</b> 01261 832491 <a href="http://www.waltergerrard.co.uk">www.waltergerrard.co.uk</a>
<b>Hill of Maunderlea Lodges</b> 01261 861250 <a href="http://www.aberdeenshireluxurylodges.com">www.aberdeenshireluxurylodges.com</a>	<b>Scottish Traditional Boat Festival</b> 01261 842951 <a href="http://www.scottishtraditionalboatfestival.org.uk">www.scottishtraditionalboatfestival.org.uk</a>
<b>Highland Hideaways</b> 01261 843424 <a href="http://www.highlandhideaways.net">www.highlandhideaways.net</a>	<b>Scottish Dolphin Centre</b> 01343 820339 <a href="http://www.wdcs.org">www.wdcs.org</a>
<b>13 Crovie Cottage</b> 07710 460694 <a href="mailto:hamish@freescotland.com">hamish@freescotland.com</a>	<b>Elgin Bid</b> 01343 550652 <a href="http://www.elginbid.co.uk">www.elginbid.co.uk</a>
<b>Cullen Bay Hotel</b> 01542 840432 <a href="http://www.cullenbayhotel.co.uk">www.cullenbayhotel.co.uk</a>	<b>East Grange</b> 01343 850 111 <a href="http://www.eastgrange.co.uk">www.eastgrange.co.uk</a>
<b>Forsyths Deli</b> 01542 842893	<b>Tourist info: <a href="http://www.banffshirecoast.com">www.banffshirecoast.com</a></b>

do. I used to cycle from Bishopmill to the ruins of Duffus Castle, and I recently took my kids there for a picnic. It was great, rolling down the hills, playing Knights of the Round Table – it really sparks the imagination.

I love Hopeman Beach and, just along the coast, an amazing secluded place we call Cove Bay with caves and a pebble beach. The drive out to Findhorn is also beautiful. There's a pub there called the Kimberley Inn, with amazing views over the water, a roaring log fire and brilliant food.

In the opposite direction, the Banffshire coast is a wild and dramatic place, with fabulous beaches and lots of lovely fishing ports. Macduff, Portsoy and tiny little Crovie are all great places for a bracing walk followed by hot chocolate or fish and chips.

At the moment it's just not practical for me to move back as there simply isn't enough work, but if I'm ever in the position to do it, I would love to get myself a bothy or a but'n'ben in Speyside. I spent a lot of my formative years working for a coppersmith, repairing the stills in the distilleries. I have a real affection for the place, so a wee bolthole somewhere near Glenfiddich would be good.

Physically, I am far away from Scotland, but I keep it close to me in my heart and soul, especially Moray and Banffshire and the little town of Elgin, which in no small measure has helped me get to where I am today. 📍



Top: The Kimberley Inn, near Findhorn. Above: Beach boy Kevin around the age of six.