

To Absent Friends

A people's festival of storytelling and remembrance



Guide to holding an event



1-7 November
#ToAbsentFriends



Welcome

To **Absent Friends** is a people's festival of storytelling and remembrance that takes place across Scotland from 1-7 November each year.

This Guide provides some information about the festival, about the kinds of events that take place, and how you can get involved by holding an event for your own community.



Storytelling on the streets of Edinburgh with Dogstone



Hibs Football Club tributes to absent friends



Community To Absent Friends supper with food by the Cyrenians.

Contents

About the festival	Page 2
Planning an event	Page 3
Inspiration & Ideas	Pages 4-11
Further resources	Page 12

About the Festival

People who have died remain a part of our lives – their stories are our stories, yet many Scottish traditions relating to the expression of loss and remembrance have faded over time.

The **To Absent Friends** festival gives people across Scotland an excuse to remember, to tell stories, to celebrate and to reminisce about people we love who have died. It is an opportunity to revive lost traditions and create new ones.

To Absent Friends takes place across Scotland from 1-7 November each year.



Tartan Harmony choir performs a concert To Absent Friends

The To Absent Friends Festival exists to encourage participation. Groups, communities and organisations are welcome to plan events, and these become the To Absent Friends event programme.

Events can be public or private, large or small, celebratory or reflective... communities are invited to take part in whatever way works for them.



We Remember them Well at Leith Docker's Club

Planning an event

We welcome new events as part of the To Absent Friends Festival.

Check out page 12 for details about small grants and other resources available to support people to plan an event.

Remembrance activities can trigger strong emotions, and it is important to try to imagine how people will relate to the experience. You might wish to consider:

- Who is your event for and what would they find meaningful?
- What kind of activities will your target audience want to engage with?
- How will you ensure people feel comfortable and not awkward?
- How will you encourage and support people to come along?

Events usually work best when they are organised by people who know a community well or are part of it themselves.



Storyteller Margot Henderson leads reminiscences at the **Scottish International Storytelling Centre**



Participants in To Absent Friends performances with the **RSNO**



Gone but not forgotten - a performance poetry evening in the Blind Poet pub

Remembrance Walks

Walks can provide a space for reflection without pressure to talk. A remembrance walk doesn't have to be long, but might be to a place of special significance to a community.

Sometimes people walk after dark, bringing lanterns, candles or torches. The walk might culminate with the laying of tributes, reading poetry, planting a tree, or lighting a fire. Sometimes people prepare for the walk in advance by making some kind of artwork or tribute.



Cranhill Development Trust invited their local community to join **a walk of remembrance** from Cranhill Park to the Cranhill Community Garden. Walkers were given candlelit lanterns and invited to bring tributes to honour and remember dead loved ones. The group laid tributes within a special installation in the gardens and enjoyed a pot luck community meal together afterwards inside the Cranhill Development Trust.

Falkland Centre for Stewardship opened up Falkland Estate for an **evening walk and remembrance** led by Fife poet Jayne Wilding. The event included some walking, some listening, and some sharing, on themes of light and darkness, inside and outside.

“it was just lovely....a bit of gentle magic on a dark and windy night.”

Participant in Falkland walk

Quiet Spaces

Sometimes people just want some quiet time with their own thoughts, but that can be hard to find with busy lives and jobs.

In previous years hospital chapels and churches have held unstructured drop-in sessions, sometimes with options for quiet remembrance activities such as lighting a candle or writing in a remembrance book.

A quiet room or outdoor remembrance bench or garden can provide an oasis in busy environments such as care homes, hospitals or shopping centres.

Art exhibitions can also provide reflective spaces for people to find calm.



The **'selfie wings' remembrance bench** in Inch Park, Perth



RESOURCES

The **'essence of a memory'** photographic exhibition has been displayed in various venues across Scotland. If you'd like to book it, email pauline@palliativecarescotland.org.uk.

Arts & Crafts

Many people get a sense of fulfillment from creating something new, and find the process of making art in remembrance of someone they love a positive experience.

Workshops for adults or children, creating art in the form of memory boxes, lanterns, creative writing or paintings can prompt sharing of stories, memories, laughter and tears.

Beautiful events can be created around people's artwork, for example photographic exhibitions, a puppet show or a poetry evening.

“I feel so much better thinking about her. It has been like having a weight lifted remembering her as she was.”

Library of Legends participant



The **Library of Legends** provided a space for people to paint artwork in memory of dead loved ones.

People shared photos evoking precious memories for the the **Essence of a Memory** photo competition.



NHS Lothian held a ‘**memory-box making**’ **workshop** where people gathered momentos, personalised boxes, and shared memories.

Poetry Circus held a pub-based **poetry night** where amateur poets shared their writings on the theme ‘gone but not forgotten’.



RESOURCES

GROUP ACTIVITY IDEAS

Here are some ideas for group activities that can help people to make an artwork, story or poem inspired by someone they care about who has died: [Ideas for group activities](#)

Get-togethers

Sometimes what people value most is a simple opportunity to gather together and connect with others.

In previous festivals, people have organised all kinds of get-togethers for their community, bringing people together to chat, and share stories and memories.

Often these are small, informal gatherings, for example a coffee morning for care home residents and their families, or for a peer support group.

Sometimes gatherings can be larger, open to everyone and have a more formal structure.

“I like being able to release the emotions I’ve been holding back for all these years.”

Participant from HMP Edinburgh

Marie Curie and **HMP Edinburgh** invited prisoners to join in sessions where they could discuss bereavement and grief.

Participants were welcomed with tea, coffee, and biscuits, and then invited to honour dead loved ones by having their names written on a leaf and hanging the leaf onto the memory tree.



During the group discussions, participants shared their thoughts, stories, and memories about people they cared about that had died and spoke about some of their struggles of dealing with death and bereavement in prison.

All Strong Scotland organised **All Strong Forever**, inviting their community to share



stories of bereavement, while celebrating the memories of departed loved ones. Everyone had the opportunity to share their stories, memories and experiences of processing grief over sandwiches, tea and coffee. There was also the chance to paint stones, and to create messages and designs on leaves to hang on a remembrance tree.

Food & Drink

Getting together over food and drink is a popular way of connecting with friends and family, and meeting new people.



A community in **Eskdalemuir** invited people to gather for an evening of supper, stories and music in honour of people who have died.

Participants could sing, play or recite their own contribution to the evening, and bring something to place on the tree of remembrance. The evening also featured readings and songs from the Esk Valley Scribblers and a performance by the Eskdalemuir Jazz Improv choir.



Rashilee Care Home invited residents to reminisce and share stories over tea and cake.

REMINISCENCE CAFE

A Café of Reminiscence is an opportunity to share stories and memories of the people we have loved who have died, in a welcoming environment over tea and cake.

It can be held among friends, but can work even better among strangers. More information about holding a Café of Reminiscence, including a 'conversation menu' to help break the ice, is available here:

[Cafe of Reminiscence Resources](#)

TO ABSENT FRIENDS SUPPER

The Absent Friends Supper is a modern take on a timeless concept - getting together over food to remember people who have died.

Suppers can be formal or informal, public or private, dedicated to one person, or held in memory of many.

If you're interested in organising something similar, check out these resources:

[To Absent Friends Supper: A Guide](#)

RESOURCES



Music

Music and memory are strongly intertwined. Hearing a familiar song can transport you to a different time and place, and help you to remember an event, a feeling... or a person.

Music is at the heart of many To Absent Friends festival events, often used to create a reflective space for quiet remembrance or as a starting point for sharing memories.

Accord Hospice in Paisley hosted an event for Day Therapy attendants, providing opportunities to share music that brought back memories for them, share stories, and listen to the stories of others.



"it's nice to have time and space to specifically reflect on those who we miss and love".

Participant from Accord Hospice

Fiona Beeley and community-based Feck Radio Productions put together a **To Absent Friends podcast**, playing community requests of pieces of music that held memories of dead loved ones.



Peacock Nursing Home in Livingston invited the families of residents who have died to take

part in an **afternoon of musical remembrance**. A guest singer performed the favourite songs of past residents, and families chatted over light refreshments.

Each November, the Edinburgh Brass Band holds a **To Absent Friends Concert**, inviting the local community to join them, free of charge, for an evening of reflective music in the beautiful surroundings of Edinburgh's St John's Church.



Tributes and Installations

Remembrance can be as simple as lighting a candle or writing someone's name. Gathered together, such acts can become powerful public tributes.

“This was so moving. Last year I wrote two names, and this year I had six to write”
Participant in *Gone but not Forgotten*



Life, Death, Lillies was an interactive art installation by Edinburgh Napier University in Edinburgh's Grassmarket. Passers-by could memorialise a dead loved one within an illuminated lily and place it in this temporary memorial garden, creating a beautiful overall effect.

North Argyll Carers Centre holds an annual event - **Gone but not Forgotten** - where bereaved carers from Argyll and the Isles meet on a local beach and write the names of the loved ones they have lost in the sand. They watch together as the sea washes the names away with the incoming tide.



RESOURCES

TRIBUTE WALL

There are lots of different ways to create interactive public tributes. If you're looking for inspiration, check out the instructions on how to make a To Absent Friends public tribute wall here: [Make a To Absent Friends wall](#)



Something original

To Absent Friends is an opportunity to remember people who've died. You can take part in whatever way works for you.

If you like one of the ideas in this booklet, feel free to copy it, add your own unique twist, or adapt it to suit your own circumstances.

Or perhaps you have a new idea, something you haven't seen done before but that you think will create a beautiful experience for people in your community.

All kinds of events are welcome as part of the To Absent Friends festival.

People in Willowbrae, Edinburgh created a **Window Wanderland**, decorating their windows in memory of people who had died.

Window wanderlands have been described as "a way to connect people, transforming streets into magical outdoor galleries". More information about organising a Window Wanderland is available here: <https://www.windowwanderland.com/>



Citadel Arts Group, a Leith-based charity devoted to expressing the creativity of older people, put on **We Remember Them Well**, a community gathering and showcase of original writing, music and performances by local artists, drawing on memories of people and times gone by.



Hibs Football Club fans shared tributes on posters around the stadium



Action Party organised **remembrance campfires** on Portobello Beach. Groups of families and friends gathered around fires, sharing photos, stories and memories.

Further resources

Small Grants

The Scottish Partnership for Palliative Care runs a small grants scheme to support groups to participate in the festival.

Find out more at the To Absent Friends website.

Getting ready for To Absent Friends: Lunchtime Chat

We host an informal lunchtime chat every year for people who are thinking of hosting an event. It's a chance to meet others, share ideas and concerns, and ask questions to help you plan.

To book a place, email:
samara@palliativecarescotland.org.uk

Free Resources

Free resources are available on our website, including:

[Ideas for group art activities](#)

[Reminiscence Cafe](#)

[Conversation Menu](#)

[To Absent Friends supper guide](#)

[Guide to making a Tribute Wall](#)

[Essence of a Memory photo exhibition](#) - an exhibition we can lend out.

Contact us

www.toabsentfriends.org.uk

If you have any questions or would like to chat, email:
samara@palliativecarescotland.org.uk





To Absent Friends is an initiative of the Scottish Partnership for Palliative Care. It is part of our Good Life, Good Death, Good Grief work to make Scotland a place where everyone can help when someone is caring, dying or grieving.

www.palliativecarescotland.org.uk

www.goodlifedeathgrief.org.uk

www.toabsentfriends.org.uk



Cover artwork by John Martin Fulton

