

Moonlighting ...

By Mike Trippitt

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WITH SUMMER UPON US, the wedding season is again in full swing.

In May, we witnessed the full trappings of a Royal wedding. But in the same month, a woman convicted of forcing her daughter into marriage was sent to prison for four-and-a-half years in what is believed to be the first case of its kind.

The act of marriage has not always been a fairytale affair, nor is trauma and scandal anything new.

Back in 1975 Leo Sayer's hit single "Moonlighting" brought the story of a runaway marriage into the music charts, and Scotland's renowned marriage centre into a generation's consciousness:

*"My mother will have lost her mind.
We're only ten miles to Gretna,
they're three hundred behind."*

Gretna Green's old Blacksmith's Shop has been a venue of choice for thousands of marrying couples for almost three-hundred years. But what was it about Gretna Green, and in particular a blacksmith, that made elopers flock there?

"Purely and simply because it was the first place over the border in Scotland, and because of the difference in marriage laws," says Susan Clark, the fourth-generation of the family owners of the Gretna Green site.

She explains that in the 18th century Scottish law permitted a person to marry without giving any notice, and at the age of 16 without parental consent. In England marriages could only take place in a church, and parental consent was required up to the age of 21.

"At that time anyone who was regarded as having a profession, and a blacksmith was such a person,



could marry people. The Old Blacksmith's Shop was the first place they could stop and the wedding happen. It was a case of location, location, location."

So many young lovers raced to Scotland to be wed, often pursued anxiously, and on occasions with hostility, by troubled parents. Some marriages were scandalous – lovers desperate to marry; fathers desperate to stop it.

Marriages could take place immediately on arrival in Gretna Green. No ritual or pre-marriage formalities were required: *"The ceremony was performed by handfasting. That is all that needed to happen, with a recognised person of standing in the village and before two witnesses."*

The Blacksmith therefore became a marriage celebrant and the anvil assumed altar-like significance: *"Legend has it that just as a blacksmith joined two pieces of metal together on the anvil, so too people were joined together over the anvil,"* says Susan Clark.

Although anvil marriages were outlawed in Scotland in 1940 and the roll of the blacksmith "Anvil Priest" came to an end, Gretna Green remains a centre of romance, a popular location for thousands of weddings a year and a worthy tourist attraction.

Let us hope this summer that no young person will need to run either from parents seeking to prevent their marriage, or from parents forcing them into one.