

Chairman's Report 2014 - 2015

Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, and a warm welcome to the Annual General Meeting of Castletown Heritage Society.

I would like to begin by expressing our gratitude for your support towards the society. Without your continuing support we cannot continue to flourish. Your support has been provided in different ways; attending meetings and talks, visiting our exhibitions, participating in workshops, paying membership subscriptions and giving donations and also providing a variety of artefacts. You have offered advice, provided information and given your time. We particularly appreciate the presence of our fellow users of Castlehill premises- DFT, the Highland Wood turners Association and AOC Archaeology.

Visitors As well as many local and British visitors we also continue to welcome people from across the world including USA, Canada, Australia and NZ, Russia, Belgium, Denmark, China, Jamaica, France, Germany, Holland, Brazil, Portugal and Austria. Our best estimate from the visitor's book, recognising that not everyone signs, indicates about 1,500 people visited our exhibitions.

As well as visits from families and individuals we have hosted group visits from a number of local organisations. We also had a visit from Westminster City Council who are considering using Caithness flagstone in their public works and wanted to see it for themselves first hand.

You may not realise how well the Castlehill premises are used. We have the wood turners each Saturday morning; Monday art class; the spinners group; regular monthly meetings of Caithness Astronomy Group; Dunnett Forest Trust Board meetings; Scottish Ornithologists' Club. In addition the premises have been used this year by: the radio hams for exams; Caithness Archaeology Trust meetings; Venture North meetings; Bower Gardening Club; Brough Bay Association; Home-Start Caithness; the Environmental Research Institute; there may well be others I have overlooked.

Building Works and Improvements. There have been no major capital works this year, the emphasis being on steady improvements and ongoing maintenance. We are very pleased to have had the new road signs erected on the main approach roads shortly after last years AGM. Hopefully we will not hear the once common remark made by visitors that they did not know we were here or how to find us. We are very grateful to Highland Council for their grant of £1,500 from the Ward Discretionary Grant and to Gillian Coghill for her support and assistance in securing that grant.

You will have noticed the improvements at the main entrance – a door to close off the main corridor to try and create a more welcoming entrance area. Thanks are due to Hugh Crowden and Davie Swanson for their efforts on this. What you cannot see on the other side of the door is Alan Bruce busily working away on painting the whole length of the corridor walls – a bit like the Forth Bridge! Once that is finished he will be painting the floor. Thanks Alan.

After 6½ years of solid, reliable, continuous service our log boiler was showing signs of wear and tear. Some of the fire hearth ceramic block had started to disintegrate, interfering with the burning process and making it more difficult to light and also reducing the efficiency of the boiler. A full set of replacement ceramics was purchased and then Neil Buchan spent a busy day stripping, cleaning and rebuilding the boiler, restoring it to its former glory. Hopefully good for another 6 years.

We also continue to renew other capital items as necessary such as scanner, lawnmower, fridge, and the chairs you are sitting on!

Routine maintenance work has continued as necessary, for example to repair damage caused by the bad storm earlier in the year. These jobs are absolutely essential in order to present the best possible experience to our visitors. We are very pleased that Hugh Crowden continues to take the lead on these jobs.

Exhibitions This year we have had several different displays. In the summer the theme was, as in previous summers, the local flagstone industry. Over the winter months and only just cleared away, we had a popular and fascinating display of artefacts, tools and domestic equipment from a bygone era and how these have evolved over time into supposedly modern 'labour saving' gadgets that we take for granted.

This year we have also set-up a Maritime History exhibition in the archaeological room which aims to provide an insight into the historic relationship that Castletown and the Parish of Orlig has with the sea.

In July we had the opening of a different sort of exhibition, a display of postcard artworks on the theme of the sea, a joint venture with Brough Bay Association. The success of the exhibition was largely due to the efforts of local artists Joanne Kaar and Liz O'Donnell, ably assisted by other members of BBA. However, the exhibition would not have been such a success without the artistic talents and generosity of locals and others further afield, including some international contributions, with over 200 artworks on display. Businesses near and far also generously supported the event.

The opening event saw a capacity audience of well over 100 people with background music provided by local musicians, Dave Broughton and Joe & Joanne Kaar. Funds were raised by a secret silent auction of the artworks, a raffle at the opening event and a further raffle drawn at the end of the exhibition. A total of over £4,500 was raised with the proceeds split 50/50 between ourselves and BBA. Overall, a very successful exhibition which drew in a lot of extra visitors.

Not actually an exhibition, but this year we opened our gates into the garden area during the summer months. Thanks to the continuous efforts of Irene Wares visitors were able to enjoy the outstanding display of flowers and shrubs etc.

Activities Over the last year CHS has had a number of different activities including:

- Monday evening art classes and the regular spinning group evenings.
- Series of drawing classes run by Annie Kieran of Highlife.
- Writers' workshop and evening talk held by the Caithness Writers Group and led by Angus Dunn, poet and novelist.
- Thanks to Wick Coastal Rowing Club, a number of participants were able to experience rowing round Dunnet Bay in a locally built classic Skiff - the standard of build and finish of which is superb! Fortunately the weather was absolutely perfect
- A Plant workshop run by David Black from the Plantlife charity.
- Wine making talk (and tasting) by Patrick Carroll – who you will know tragically died suddenly a few weeks ago.
- Anna Jemmett, RSPB's Community Engagement Officer, gave a talk on RSPB's operations in Forsinard explaining some of the effects of global warming and carbon capture via the peat bog.
- The woodturners open day and demonstration.

Once again we were pleased to participate in the Wild North Festival. This year we had a bumblebee display set up by the Bumblebee Conservation Trust, a paper making workshop run by Joanne Kaar, an 'Out & About With Ralph' talk by Ben McGregor, and a talk by Robin Inglis on honey bees.

Returning by popular demand, the August Sunday afternoon Cream Teas were as delicious as ever and due to the glorious weather were a great success and attracted extra visitors. Our sincere thanks to Helen Gunn and her able assistant, Hugh Crowden.

A new venture was this years Food Fayre. We had a constant stream of people looking to purchase from an excellent selection of quality local produce. Feed back from stall holders and the visiting public confirmed this was something we should definitely do again. We are very grateful to all the stall holders for entering into the spirit of the event and contributing to what proved to be a magnificent raffle.

Neil's Iceland Trip: Due to the common Norse heritage of Castletown and the parish of Orlig with Iceland, our Vice-Chairman, Neil, applied to take part in a cultural heritage programme in Iceland. The objective was to explore how Iceland approaches the portrayal and exploitation of its cultural history. Competition was stiff and Neil was delighted when he was selected, more so when it turned out he was the only 'amateur' in the party - the other 5 were all professionally associated with cultural heritage in some way.

Neil described his Icelandic experiences in two talks that he gave as part of our series of winter talks. The knowledge and practical experience he gained will hopefully be useful during delivery of our own vernacular skills workshops. In summing up his Iceland experience, Neil simply stated "*I want to go back!*"

We continued with our traditional Boxing Day opening where around 30 supporters were greeted with a warm welcome, mince pies, and even hotter mulled wine! As usual the afternoon proved to be a great success with Neil and Alan as hosts for the day.

We again organised a series of winter evening talks. These were:

- "The Men Who Went Far Away" - a talk by Ian Leith on the history of the Caithness folk who went to Patagonia in the late 19th, early 20th Centuries.
- "Iceland - a Caithness Saga" – an illustrated talk by Neil Buchan about his Icelandic trip.
- "Highland Graveyards" - a lighthearted talk by Nick Lindsay of Clyne Heritage Society revealing some fascinating facts about graveyards.
- "Traditional Icelandic Turf Buildings" – a second talk by Neil about his hands-on experiences in Iceland and activities to promote the preservation of traditional building skills and methods.

The last activity of this year was just last Saturday when we hosted an Archive Road Show by Gordan Reid of Caithness Archives who brought along a selection of archives relevant to Castletown and Orlig parish. Attendance was better than Gordan was hoping for.

Outreach. As in previous years we have been invited to talk to various other local organisations. Muriel leads on this and has given talks to WRIs, Family History Group, and Thurso West Church Guild. Muriel is also going to be a TV star! The BBC Landward programme was in the county the other month filming a Caithness Special programme, part of which covered the flagstone trail with Muriel as the presenter / narrator. It will be shown on Friday 1 May at 7.30pm on BB1 and repeated on Saturday 2 May at 5.30pm on BB2.

Future Plans and Activities. These Include:

- Setting up a new exhibition on crofting and farming.
- Continuation of the popular weekly art classes with Helen Moore on Monday evenings. People of all abilities are welcome.
- Another demonstration open day by the wood turners association.
- A pottery workshop with Alice Hill towards the end of the year.
- A repeat of the ever popular Rag Rug making with Nona Mackay.
- Book launch of “Archaeology in Caithness” by Andy Heald & John Barbour – week beginning 11 May. Watch this space for final date.
- An evening event entitled “A Song Among Stones”. This will include art, poetry and music about 7th century Irish Celtic monks who travelled from Iona to Iceland.
- During the winter months we hope to have another series of interesting and informative talks.

By popular demand we are holding another Food Fayre on Sat 20 June. Jayne Blackburn is busy organising this and we hope it will be as successful as last. This is an event not to be missed.

2015 is the International Year of Light aimed at highlighting the importance of light and optical technologies in our lives. Locally we are participating in this through a programme of events over the year, a number of which are being held at Castlehill. These are:

- A talk on observing and photographing the solar eclipse (in March).
- “Painting With Light” – a talk by Neil Buchan on photography.
- “Turning to the Dark Side” – a talk by Dave Jones, RSPB, followed by a guide to the stars by CAG and finishing with an outdoors session.
- “Future of Astronomical Telescopes” – a talk by Prof Martin Hendry.
- “The Light of Other Worlds – Exoplanets and the Search for ET” – a talk by Dr Duncan Forgan.
- Finally, a light themed quiz night.

On a different theme, we are going to have restored a painting donated from the Sinclair Gunn collection. It is of HMS Samarang, a survey vessel, which sailed around South America and the Java Sea. We have received quotes for the work and now just need to get it to Edinburgh.

Projects I am delighted to be able to provide you with a very positive update on a major project mentioned at last years AGM and which we will be carrying out over the coming year, namely the LiDAR archaeological project. We were successful in our applications for funding and we have secured £52,500 from the HLF and £20,000 from the C&NSF. To say we are delighted with this outcome is an understatement. You may have seen the articles in the local press about the project and the funding awards.

To deliver the project we will be working in partnership with a commercial archaeological company. The contract specification was advertised on the Public Contracts Scotland website which resulted in 12 expressions of interest and from those we received 4 submitted tenders. These have now been assessed and the contract will be awarded tomorrow.

The project will offer volunteers the opportunity to take part in the investigation and interpretation of the LiDAR survey data and the Bronze Age landscapes it has revealed. The project will 'kick-off' with a launch event, hopefully around end May. It will comprise a series of about 14 workshops with associated practical on-site field activities, a number of evening lectures and a series of hands-on Bronze Age craft workshops. We are hoping to tailor a number of the workshops specifically to engage school children. The results of the project will be incorporated into a static display to be installed at Castlehill, which will include an interactive digital resource, and which will be shown and demonstrated at a closing event somewhere around March next year.

So, watch this space for news of the launch event and please let us know if you are interested in participating in the project.

Word of Thanks I would like to express my thanks to the outgoing committee members who have served this year. Vice Chairman **Neil Buchan**, Treasurer **John Crowden**, Secretary **Jayne Blackburn**, and committee members **Muriel Murray**, **Liz Geddes**, **Alan Bruce** and **co-opted member Elspet Chapman**. (**Fiona MacLeod**)

All of these people have brought their own set of skills, experience, enthusiasm and hard work to ensure the continuing success of the Society. John Crowden, moved away from the area part way through the year and so understandably resigned from the committee. I would like to record my particular thanks to John for his efforts and contributions over the years. He has been sorely missed.

However, there are other people who assist us in various ways and who I must thank:

[Hugh Crowden](#), who continues to assist us in the maintenance and running of the Centre.

[Helen Gunn](#), who together with Hugh arranged and ran the successful Cream Teas event.

[Irene Wares](#), our lady with green fingers for bringing on seeds, planting, beds and borders to produce the stunning garden displays.

[Liz Buchan](#), for her efforts and contributions to catering for many of the events we held.

[Davie Swanson](#), for his joinery skills who together with Hugh carried out the entrance improvements.

[Jane Donn](#), for organising and cataloguing mapping materials.

[Julia Rand](#), for archiving and cataloguing work.

[Sheila Moir](#), photographer extraordinaire.

[Sharon Pottinger](#), who provides assistance when and how she can.

[Morris Pottinger](#), for his continued advice, information, and assistance in the heritage and genealogy of the area.

Last but not least, the Boiler Men, [Neil Buchan](#), [Alan Bruce](#), [Jim Moar](#), [Rey Custer](#) and [Hugh Crowden](#) for their sterling and continuous efforts keeping the boiler in operation and you warm. Also [TC?!](#), for his skills with the chain saw in cutting our logs to size.

Appeal The centre is at present managed on your behalf by a relatively small management committee, with assistance by such people as just mentioned. We would welcome any help that you may be able to provide. This may range from being a committee member to providing ad hoc assistance in any form you wish. Any such offers would be gratefully received.

Finally I hope I have presented a picture of a Society in excellent shape, ready for the challenges of another interesting year ahead. Thank you.

The next item on the agenda is the Treasurer's report.