

**CASTLETOWN HERITAGE SOCIETY**  
**AGM 22 APRIL 2021**

**Chairman's Report**

Welcome to the 2021 Annual General Meeting of Castletown Heritage Society.

The 2020 AGM was originally scheduled to be held in April 2020 in accordance with our constitution, however the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and the ensuing Scottish Government restrictions precluded the possibility of holding a physical meeting, therefore the AGM had to be postponed. The ongoing risks and restrictions arising from the pandemic stretched beyond the summer, therefore the Management Committee decided to trial holding a 'virtual' AGM using the Zoom video conferencing platform, having successfully trialled holding a 'virtual' committee meeting using Zoom. The AGM took place on Thursday 15 October 2020 and enabled our *2019-20 Trustees and Financial Report* to be completed and submitted to the Scottish Charity Regulator (OSCR) within the required time period.

It was generally agreed at the end of the 2020 AGM that the arrangements and process for holding the AGM using Zoom had been successful, therefore the 2021 AGM should revert to the correct month of April and would be held again using Zoom should Covid restrictions at the time prevent a physical meeting, as has proven to be the case. My Chairman's Report therefore covers the period 16 October 2020 to 31 March 2021.

The Management Committee have held four full committee meetings and several sub-committee/project meetings since the 2020 AGM, all using the 'Zoom' video-conferencing platform. This has enabled the business of the Society to be progressed and conducted efficiently, and using Zoom has reinforced awareness of the potential opportunities available through using digital media platforms to promote and grow the activities and business of the Society. More of this later in my report.

As at today Castlehill Heritage Centre remains closed to the public. Similarly, the Society has been unable to host within Castlehill Heritage Centre any activities or meetings by other regular community groups, such as the Caithness Astronomy Group, North Highland Wood-turners Association, Castlehill Artists, and the Caithness Bird Club. These organisations have all indicated that they wish to return to Castlehill once we re-open, subject to their own risk assessments confirming it will be safe to do so. We are very grateful for their continued support.

With the agreement of the Society, Dunnet Forestry Trust has continued to operate from their base in the Centre, appropriate arrangements being put in place to manage the Covid risk.

**Review of activities and achievements**

Notwithstanding the challenges posed by the Covid restrictions, the Society has continued to operate and deliver heritage related activities during the period, including embracing on-line digital platforms to increase our 'virtual presence'.

- **The Jack Saxon Fossil Collection**

Perhaps the most exciting activity has been the initiation of a new project to curate, interpret and make accessible to the community the unique and substantial collection of fossils from Caithness and the far north of Scotland that was collected, researched and documented by Jack Saxon, a local but widely recognised and published amateur palaeontologist. The collection has been gifted to Castletown Heritage

Society by the family of the late Jack Saxon. Informal discussions with Aberdeen University and the Scottish Geological Trust have made us aware the collection is of more than local significance.

Specific outcomes of the project are:

- a) The secure and technically correct curation of the collection,
- b) The creation of a permanent and fully accessible physical display of a representative selection of the collection at Castlehill Heritage Centre, supported by quality interpretative materials. The display will be set in context, linking the flagstone beds formed during the Devonian period to present day landscape and ecology, and to the flagstone industry's social and economic significance for Caithness.
- c) The creation of a museum standard web-based photographic catalogue of the collection, enabling wider public access and capable of supporting both local and remote academic research activity. This will involve photographing each specimen to the accepted scientific standard using appropriate quality photographic equipment and associated IT. The images and contextual material will be made accessible on-line using 'eHive', a proprietary web-based catalogue/database package specifically designed for the small museum sector.

In the longer term it is our intention to use eHive to make other material from our collections at Castlehill available on-line, further increasing awareness of the area's wider heritage and serving to drive increased community and tourist footfall.

The Fossils project is being led by Alan Bruce, who together with Muriel Murray, Jayne Blackburn and new volunteer Jackie Johnstone are working towards physically transferring the collection to Castlehill during May. We very much look forward to the launch of the new fossil display which will probably be in the Archaeology Laboratory.

- **On-line digital media**

As part of our strategy to increase our presence on-line we have established *Olig Observations* - a series of short audio podcasts, plus our own dedicated *Castletown Heritage Society YouTube channel*, both of which can be readily accessed from the new 'Podcasts and YouTube' tab on our website.

Six of the eight podcasts currently available were recorded by committee members Muriel and Jayne, each offering a sometimes personal glimpse into some aspect of the social, industrial, agricultural, maritime, military or archaeological heritage of the village of Castletown and the Parish of Olig. Lindsay Broomfield, a local professional costume maker with a passion for heritage costumes created the seventh podcast in which she reviews our entry to the virtual Highland Threads Exhibition – more of this later. Similarly the eighth podcast was created in support of the Highland Objects project, which I will report on shortly.

There are five videos currently available on the YouTube channel. The first one presents an audio-visual slideshow of views around Castletown and has proven to be very popular, with 465 views to date. The other four were created by Muriel, where she has added a narrative soundtrack to the PowerPoint presentations from four evening talks she had previously given at Castlehill.

Feedback to the podcasts and videos has been very positive, and it is our intention to grow the library of items, with the intention of creating both a valuable on-line resource accessible to a wide audience, and as a marketing tool showcasing the history and heritage accessible through a physical visit to Castlehill Heritage Centre.

- **Museums and Heritage Highland**

Our membership of Museums and Heritage Highland has proven to be extremely helpful, such as providing access to free digital platform training webinars. Regular 'Heritage Café' meetings using the Zoom platform has enabled excellent networking with the other member organisations.

At the last AGM I reported that the Society had taken part in the MHH Highland Objects project, which is a series of short podcasts each of which focuses on an object of cultural or historical significance located in the highlands. The object we entered was the amazing Custer Tablecloth, which is a unique and poignant memento of the service personnel who were based at RAF Castletown during WWII. The podcast features our Chairman and Rey Custer, who is the great-grand-nephew of Isobel Custer who embroidered the tablecloth in the 1940s. Do visit the Highland Objects website [www.highlandobjects.wordpress.com/](http://www.highlandobjects.wordpress.com/) and leave positive feedback if you like the podcast!

We also took part in the Highland Threads project, a unique and innovative virtual exhibition showcasing costumes from the collections of fourteen museums from across the Highlands. Our entry is a ladies mourning outfit dating from the late nineteenth century and is one of a number donated to us by a descendant of the owner. The virtual exhibition went live on 1<sup>st</sup> April, and our Chairman was a panel member during the live on-line launch webinar which was attended by over 300 people in the UK and beyond. There were guest speakers from many of the fourteen museums and heritage centres taking part talking about the costumes, the stories behind them and how the project will support Highland heritage.

The virtual exhibition can be accessed via the dedicated Highland Threads website, [www.highlandthreads.co.uk/](http://www.highlandthreads.co.uk/).

Both the Highland Objects and the Highland Threads projects generated positive media coverage for the Society.

- **Living Landscapes of Castletown**

Last year I reported that the Society formed a very successful link with the University of the Highlands & Islands whereby support was provided to Julian Grant, a PhD student researching the relationship between local heritage and tourism in communities around the route of the North Coast 500. Inevitably, Covid has had a major impact on Julian's research, with many of his scheduled activities having to be delayed and/or redesigned to be Covid-friendly. Of particular note is his *Living Landscapes of Castletown* project, where five volunteers from the Society were issued with a disposable camera which they used to chronicle their own relationship with the community landscapes around them as they went about their daily routines over the course of October 2020. Through a series of one-to-one and group sessions using Zoom the photos were shared with the participants and the stories and meanings behind them were discussed and debated. The final results are really amazing, and are available to view on-line via the 'Living Landscapes' tab on our website. We wish Julian every success in completing his PhD as he moves his focus of study to the Seaboard villages of Easter Ross.

- **Monday Night Art Class**

The highly successful and ever popular Monday night art class continued unabated over the period, utilising the virtual 'Covid-friendly' format of on-line tuition sessions led by local artist Helen Moore. An excellent example of what can be achieved with a little positivity.

## **Building fabric and infrastructure.**

The risk assessments and revised protocols implemented during the shutdown period have maintained the facility in a safe and secure condition and I am grateful to all those who have undertaken essential tasks at Castlehill under these restricted arrangements.

The adapted strategy of running the log boiler twice a week in conjunction with a small number of electric radiators on thermostats and time switches over the winter period has successfully kept the building fabric, artefacts and documents adequately warm and dry.

Thanks must go to our log boiler stokers, Hugh, Roy, Neil, Alan, Alex and Brian Campbell for their sterling effort throughout the period, and to Gordon Buchan and James Henderson for the loan of their tractor and trailer respectively for the log runs to Dunnet Forest.

## **Looking forward - Re-opening of Castlehill Heritage Centre to Visitors**

The current 'roadmap' published by the Scottish Government permits visitor attractions such as Castlehill to reopen from the 26<sup>th</sup> of April, subject to appropriate Covid compliant arrangements being in place. The Management Committee is working towards implementing adapted operating procedures, both physical and administrative, to ensure that the risks are manageable and that our volunteers are comfortable with manning the Centre and interfacing with the visiting public. The safety and wellbeing of our volunteers is my number one priority, and we have adopted a measured, cautious approach with the beginning of June as a working target for re-opening. This is under continuous review and updates will be regularly posted on our website.

In order to support the implementation of the required physical and administrative arrangements, the Society submitted an application to the *Museums and Galleries Scotland Covid Adaption Fund* during March. This fund is designed to support museums with the costs of opening back up in a way that ensures the safety and confidence of volunteers and visitors while restrictions are still in place due to COVID-19. We requested support with the purchase of essential adaptations such as signage, barriers, screens, cleaning materials, hygiene products and dispensers. I am pleased to advise that our application was approved and we have been awarded the full value of our request. All materials have been ordered.

Further funding support was received from the Scottish Government in the form of a *Temporary Closure Grant* under the *Coronavirus (COVID-19): Strategic Framework Business Fund*. The Temporary Closure Grant supports qualifying businesses required to close by law for the duration of the Level 4 restrictions imposed on 26 December 2020. Our operations at Castlehill Heritage Centre qualified under the arrangements and by 31 March we had received a total of £6,000 in accordance with the generic payment scheme. The final payments under the scheme were received on 19 April.

To minimise the Covid transfer risk associated with handling cash we have invested in an electronic commerce system, whereby we are able to securely accept credit/debit card transactions for donations, purchases, and membership subscription payments, either on-line or via a card/contactless reader in the Centre. This is consistent with Scottish Government heritage sector best practice guidance. A cash donation box will still be made available however and managed in an appropriately hygienic manner.

As I mentioned, we hope to be able to re-open Castlehill Heritage Centre to visitors at the beginning of June, initially on a one day a week basis, possibly with slightly extended hours. The proposed physical arrangements to support re-opening will have a significant impact on the current layout and operation of the Centre. We intend to implement a one-way system, with entry via the double doors at the end of the long building. A labyrinth one-way arrangement will be implemented in the main hall, with exit via the

central fire exit onto the patio area. The exit route via the garden will also be managed. Appropriate barriers and screens will be in place to minimise any opportunity for 'hands-on' contact by visitors with the displays, artefacts and the building infrastructure. Only the disabled toilet will be available and hand sanitisation stations and social distancing floor markings will be in place, together with a queueing system outside the double doors. Hopefully as we move through the summer these adapted arrangements will be able to be relaxed, at least to some degree - fingers crossed!

The first exhibition will be entitled "The Roaring Twenties" which explores the day to day life in the village of Castletown and the parish of Olig during the 1920s. This exhibition was actually established mid-March 2020, but was only open to the public for a few days before the Centre was closed for the duration. The 'Highland Threads' Victorian mourning costume will also be on display.

The forward programme beyond June has yet to be finalised. It will be developed based on the experience gained from operating under the adapted arrangements in June and of course the evolving, and hopefully improving, Covid situation. Hands-on workshops present a particular challenge and are unlikely to start until later in the year. Similarly we will do not intend to accept coach parties for the time being.

Subject to all the above caveats, the forward programme will hopefully include at least some of the following:

- A physical display of the 'Living Landscapes of Castletown' images and stories;
- A number of other further exhibitions, yet to be decided;
- Cream Teas in August;
- A return to physical weekly art classes;
- Woodturning demonstration and woodturning Open Day;
- Evening events by the Caithness Astronomy Group and Caithness Bird Club;
- Ceramic pottery workshop;
- Metalwork/Blacksmithing workshop;
- Boxing Day Open Day; and
- a series of winter evening talks.

Further opportunities to expand our on-line digital presence will be explored, including participation in future on-line events organised and co-ordinated by Museums and Heritage Highland.

## **Acknowledgements**

Finally, I would like to express my thanks to the committee members who have served since October. Vice Chairman Roy Blackburn, Treasurer Helen Gunn, Secretary Jayne Blackburn, and committee members Alan Bruce, Elspet Chapman, Hugh Crowden, Alex Groves, Alice Morrison, and Muriel Murray.

Whilst 'on-line' virtual meetings are not to everyone's personal taste, the committee members have each embraced the revised working model and have used their various skills, experience, enthusiasm and hard work to ensure the continuing success of the Society.

I would particularly like to thank Roy, Hugh and Helen who are stepping down from nomination to the management committee after many years of dedicated service. Their support and commitment has been of great benefit to me personally during my time as Chairman.

Our website, podcast platform and YouTube Channel are updated and managed by myself, and our Facebook blog is managed by Alex - we are grateful to both as these are important platforms for maintaining the Society's presence in the community, particularly in these challenging times.

Once again our special thanks are due to Irene Wares for the huge amount of work she puts into the Heritage Garden. She continued to work in the garden during the closure and it looks just as good as always. Hopefully we will soon have visitors to appreciate all her efforts.

And finally, thanks to you all, our members and friends, for your continued support towards the Society.

Neil Buchan,  
Chairman

22 April 2021