

CASTLETOWN HERITAGE SOCIETY
AGM 26 APRIL 2022

Chairman's Report

Welcome to the 2022 Annual General Meeting of Castletown Heritage Society and my Chairman's Report for the period 1st April 2021 to 31st March 2022. It is a pleasure to be able to hold this meeting in person, the previous two AGMs having been held virtually using the Zoom video-conferencing platform as a consequence of the risks and restrictions arising from the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Management Committee has held ten meetings in the reporting period, nine using 'Zoom' and once as a hybrid meeting using both virtual and in-person attendance. Whilst we hope to be able return to routinely holding in-person meetings in the very near future, the experience of the past two years has demonstrated that the business of the Society can be progressed and conducted efficiently using video-conferencing if required. In order to formally embed and regularise the use of virtual attendance at meetings in the future the Management Committee have prepared an update to the Constitution which has been circulated to Members in advance of this meeting for review, and will be presented for adoption under agenda item five this evening.

Review of activities and achievements

Following a period of Covid driven closure Castlehill Heritage Centre reopened its doors to the public on 20 June 2021, albeit on the basis of Sunday afternoons only with extended hours from 1.30pm to 4.30pm. Thanks to the valiant efforts of our stalwart band of volunteers, all the necessary adaptations to the physical layout to make the centre fully compliant with Scottish Government Covid guidelines were put in place. A new one-way system was implemented, with visitors entering via the double doors at the end of the long building, and exiting via the central door in the main exhibition space into the Heritage Garden. Queueing arrangements, clear signage, hand sanitiser stations, social distancing markers, Track and Trace, and enhanced cleaning arrangements and risk assessed operational procedures were also implemented.

The opening exhibition was entitled "The Roaring Twenties" which explored the day to day life in the village of Castletown and the parish of Orlig 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. Our 'Victorian Mourning Dress' entry into the ['Highland Threads'](#) on-line exhibition was also on display, as was a feature display in the foyer on the [Living Landscapes of Castletown](#) project, which remains in place.

Visitor numbers grew slowly but steadily over the summer and by autumn were approaching numbers that would have been considered normal pre-Covid. Against this encouraging background we reintroduced the Wednesday afternoon opening at the end of August, reverting to our normal 2pm to 4pm each day. In September we closed the Centre

for a couple of weeks to enable a new exhibition featuring a fascinating display of local area maps, sea charts, building plans, survey equipment and plots of Caithness and Castletown area services to be installed. This exhibition was promoted as our contribution to the Highland Archaeology Festival which ran from 25 September to 15 October. The exhibition proved to be extremely popular and we are grateful to Wick Heritage Society for loaning us a large map showing Caithness education services as existed during a survey undertaken in 1949.

The re-escalation of Covid infection risk during November and December however had a marked impact on visitor numbers and volunteer confidence, and our traditional Boxing Day opening was sacrificed as a result. Just before Christmas the decision was taken to close the Centre until February during which time the current exhibition 'First and Last' was installed. I'm glad to report that our volunteers felt comfortable enough to reopen the Centre to the public on 20 February. An early bonus was visits to the centre by the Caithness Walking Group and a local Men's Mental Health support group, both of which proved very successful.

For much of the period the Society did not host any activities or meetings by other regular Centre users, such as the Caithness Astronomy Group, North Highland Wood-Turners Association, and the Caithness Bird Club. These organisations all indicated that they remained committed to returning to Castlehill once their own risk assessments confirmed it would be safe to do so, and I'm delighted to report that since February this year all of these groups have returned to in-person activities in the Centre. The highly successful and ever popular Monday night art class continued pretty much unabated over the period however, utilising a virtual 'Covid-friendly' format of on-line tuition sessions led by local artist Helen Moore. After appropriate arrangements were made, in-person sessions were re-established during October.

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

We are very grateful to all these groups for their continued support.

- **The Jack Saxon Fossil Collection**

I reported last year on 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. I am delighted to advise that this project has been pressing ahead, with a substantial number of the fossils having been photographed in preparation for transfer to our e-Hive web-based artefact management system. A new computer and photographic equipment has been purchased to support this work. I am most grateful to Dr Hercules Robinson for undertaking the photographic work

and Alan Bruce for leading the project. The work to interpret and create a physical display of the fossils has yet to get underway but we are hopeful progress on this can be achieved before the end of the year.

- **On-line digital media**

Since our initial foray into developing our virtual presence through the media of audio podcasts and YouTube videos, I am pleased to report that the Society now has sixteen audio podcasts in our *Olig Observations* series and six videos on our dedicated *Castletown Heritage Society YouTube channel*. All are available to download and enjoy on-line. A huge debt of thanks is due to Muriel Murray who is our most prolific podcast and video contributor.

Feedback to the podcasts and videos has been very positive, and it is our intention to continue 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.

- **Collaborations and Partnerships**

Our membership of Museums and Heritage Highland has continued to be extremely beneficial. Regular 'Heritage Café' meetings using the Zoom platform have enabled excellent networking with the other member organisations.

Following on from the success of our Victorian mourning dress entry in the MHH Highland Threads on-line project, our RAF Castletown Christmas Dinner Menu from 1943 was the most viewed item in the Highland Christmas Object project over the winter months.

We are currently engaged in another Museums and Heritage Highland region-wide project to establish a '*Museum of the Highlands*', a dynamic digital learning hub enabling children, young people and teachers to discover and engage with museum collections from across the Highlands in new and exciting ways. The project brings together 17 museums from across the Highlands to collaborate in bringing objects from their collections together to create a digital portal into the rich history and culture of the Highlands.

We are also actively participating in the recently reformed Northern Heritage Forum, which currently is meeting monthly in the North Coast Visitor Centre. A key objective of this group is to maximise visibility and promotion of Heritage related activities in Caithness and Sutherland, and in a similar vein we participated in a Venture North Tourism Recovery Workshop.

Another collaboration was the hosting earlier this month of a 'slightly off the wall' fundraising event run by the Caithness Society of Artists which raised over £3,500 in

support of the Ukrainian Appeal Fund. A very worthwhile event which also brought a large number of visitors to the Centre and heritage garden.

Whilst not strictly a collaboration or partnership, the Society decided last year that we could no longer afford the space to store our Dryad weaving loom and advertised it for sale through the Museums and Heritage Highland newsletter. I'm delighted to advise that the loom was bought by Grantown Museum, where it will take centre stage as a fully working exhibit within a new display reflecting the weaving heritage of the Grantown area and the Grant family dynasty. We wish Grantown Museum well with this new project.

- **Building fabric and infrastructure.**

With regard to the Centre fabric and infrastructure I am pleased to report that no major repairs were required or undertaken during the period, and none are currently pending. A contract has been placed with a local builder to replace the ridge tiles on the archive room wing. This work has been delayed due to Covid however it is thankfully not urgent, being of an early intervention, preventative nature. Never the less we hope this will get underway shortly. Elsewhere minor repairs have been carried out using in-house resources as required, such as on the fire alarm system, log boiler, lighting and IT etc. Work is also underway to remodel the office to improve workflow and storage, and the stand supporting the Merlin engine has recently been strengthened and fitted with castors enabling it to be moved for cleaning or for display reconfiguration. A new audio loop has been installed in the main hall such that hearing aid users can fully benefit from participation in meetings, workshops and presentations.

In summary, the buildings and facilities remain in good fettle.

Thanks must go to our volunteer log boiler stokers, Hugh, Roy, Neil, Alan, Alex, and Brian Campbell, not forgetting Colin Hossack who recently joined the boiler team, for their sterling effort throughout the period, and to Gordon Buchan and James Henderson for the regular loan of their tractor and dump trailer respectively for the log runs to Dunnet Forest.

Looking forward

I am delighted to advise that as of Easter weekend just past we have returned to our traditional three afternoons a week opening – Wednesday, Saturday and Sunday, 2pm to 4pm. As always, the safety and wellbeing of our volunteers and visitors is our number one priority, and we will continue to apply and comply with Scottish Government best practice Covid guidance as appropriate to a small heritage establishment such as ours.

The forward programme for the coming year has yet to be finalised, however as usual we have many exciting ideas in the brewing stage, such as:

- A gala Garden Party on 5 June as part of the Queen's Platinum Jubilee Celebrations, incorporating a woodturning demonstration and display by the North Highland Wood-turners Association and an exhibition by Caithness Astronomy Group;
- A number of exhibitions, including our traditional Flagstone themed exhibition over the summer months;
- An event supporting the unveiling of a new and unique musical themed feature in the Heritage Garden;
- A return of our traditional Cream Teas every Sunday in August;
- A hands-on workshop in the autumn by Tim Johnston, internationally acclaimed master basket-maker. Tim has been a popular workshop tutor at Castlehill on several occasions.
- A ceramic pottery workshop and a metalwork/blacksmithing workshop, both returning by demand;
- A major exhibition in November/December entitled '*Remote and Rural Remedies*', organised in conjunction with the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh;
- A presentation summarising the findings of the *Living Landscapes of Castletown* project run by Julian Grant, an UHI PhD student researching the relationship between local heritage and tourism in communities around the route of the North Coast 500;
- Potential collaboration with the 'Spirit of the Highlands' project being run by HighLife Highland;
- Our traditional Boxing Day Open Day;
- a series of winter evening talks;
- plus, of course, hosting events by our friends the North Highland Wood-turners Association, Caithness Astronomy Group, Caithness Bird Club and the Monday Night Art Club.

In addition we are working on an exciting new 'Open Store' project, where the amazing collection of objects and memorabilia tucked away in our artefact store will be made more accessible to view and explore, not just by physical visitors, but on-line through the medium of our eHive virtual collection management system.

We are also starting to think about how to make best use of the space occupied by our archaeological research laboratory and wet sieving area. The lab may for example be ideal for displaying the Jack Saxon fossil collection, and part of the wet sieving area could be converted into an enhanced, permanent exhibition featuring the heritage of RAF Castletown and the amazing story behind the Merlin engine.

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

Acknowledgements

In conclusion, I would like to express my thanks to the management committee members who have served during the period. Treasurer Jayne Blackburn, Secretary Jessica Dreaves, and committee members Alan Bruce, Elspet Chapman, Liz Geddes, Alex Groves, Joanne Howdle, Alice Morrison, Muriel Murray, and Wendy Newton.

Unfortunately, from fairly early on in the session Jessica found it difficult to deliver her secretarial responsibilities against an increasing workload at her place of employment, therefore the secretarial duties during the period were largely undertaken on a shared basis by Jayne, Muriel and myself. It was also with some regret that Elspet intimated she wished to step down from the committee in December due to family commitments.

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 and growing the Society's presence, not just in the community but also to much broader audiences.

I would like to express my particular thanks to our hard working volunteer gardener Irene Wares for the huge amount of work she has put into the Heritage Garden over the years. The garden is admired by all who visit and it is a tremendous asset to our operations at Castlehill. At the end of last year Irene stepped down from this role and I wish her all the very best in her 'retirement'. Special thanks go also to Christine Hornby for her hard work and infectious enthusiasm in taking on the lead gardener role. She has already made a notable impact, including the creation of a new rockery.

One of the services we are very proud to provide and have an excellent track record for is researching local family history information in response to queries received. This relies on accessing our wealth of documents, photographs and records stored within our archive room, and over the winter Muriel and Jayne have done an amazing job reviewing and refileing all the information. In support of this Wendy has also been busy transferring all our DVD and CD based documentation onto the main computer system. The upgraded archive system means it is now very much easier to find the information we are looking for, and I am very grateful for their meticulous effort in undertaking this task.

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

Neil Buchan,
Chairman

26 April 2022