

Castletown Heritage Society

Annual General Meeting 23 April 2014

Chairman's Report

Good evening ladies and gentlemen. It is my privilege as Vice Chairman to welcome you all to the 2014 Annual General Meeting of Castletown Heritage Society.

Some of you may be wondering why I am standing here and not the familiar face of Hugh Crowden who was elected to the role of Chairman at last year's AGM. For the past eight years Hugh has been a staunch and very proactive supporter of our Society. Without his enthusiasm, local knowledge and practical skills the task of creating and maintaining Castlehill Heritage Centre would have been a significantly greater challenge. I suspect that few people really appreciate the amount of work that Hugh did behind the scenes, quite apart from his more 'public' face in helping to run workshops and in his role as Chairman. Such a high level of commitment does of course have an impact on one's personal life, and at our committee meeting in February Hugh intimated that he wished to step down from the committee and Chairmanship in order to spend some time 'catching up' on the things that had suffered as a consequence.

It was therefore with some considerable sadness but understanding that the committee accepted Hugh's resignation. But that is only half the story because another of our stalwart supporters, Helen Gunn similarly stepped down from her position on the committee. We are delighted however that both Hugh and Helen have expressed a desire to continue to support the society, albeit at a less frenetic pace which better fits their own personal commitments.

When one looks back over the years one is drawn to an inescapable truth – that everything the Society has achieved is because of the commitment and dedication of individuals – be they society members, supporters, attendees at our talks exhibitions and workshops or part of one of the many organisations we are delighted to work in partnership with. For our society to flourish it relies heavily on the good will of so many, and in return we must constantly strive to deliver a quality experience for everyone who participates in our events or uses our premises to further their own objectives.

With that in mind it is appropriate to review what has been achieved over the past year. The 2013-14 session began with Pauline Megson of the Prince's Regeneration Trust

presenting an illustrated talk on the renovation of the flagstone workers' cottages in the Backies, followed by a visit and tour of the completed Backies cottages. CHS is pleased to have assisted The Prince's Regeneration Trust with the restoration project.

Shortly after the AGM Alan Bruce was seconded onto the committee, bringing with him an ever-expanding encyclopaedic knowledge of World War I history and local genealogy. He immediately put this to good effect by holding a Genealogy Surgery in Castlehill one afternoon in May where he offered advice on how and where to research First World War soldiers and how to interpret the results. He continues to do research in this area – but more of this later.

In late May Muriel Murray gave a talk as part of the Caithness Walking Festival on some of the fascinating artefacts that have either been donated to, or are held in trust by the Society. The talk stimulated much discussion with the audience and resulted in further items of interest being donated to the Society.

Our mission is to preserve the character, history and traditions of the Village of Castletown and Parish of Olig, and one of the means through which we do this is by running themed exhibitions and displays. On an unseasonable, blustery day in June two classes from Castletown primary school visited our Spring exhibition entitled *Schooldays in the Past*. Pupils began with a quiz to familiarise them with the content of the exhibition then in groups they went round different activity bases. They examined the contents of a school satchel of the 1880s, and another typical of the Second World War, comparing them with a present day school bag. The children tried out their skills writing on a slate and with a dipping pen. Games of yesteryear like marbles and spinning tops proved popular as did the 1930s paper craft activities of constructing a snake and a fortuneteller. We always look forward to visits from school children and hopefully by engaging them in practical, interesting activities we can spark an interest in their cultural heritage.

At the end of June the Society once again supported the Wild North Festival, putting on two events – a talk by Seona Anderson on Plants from Pre-History and a weeklong exhibition on the work of the Bumblebee Conservation Trust. The Bumble Bee exhibition proved to be extremely popular and we hope to repeat this in the coming year.

During July we tried out a new venture for the first time, serving cream teas every Sunday afternoon. The weather was kind to us enabling visitors to enjoy their tea and locally

themed home baking at the picnic tables in the garden, including such delicious delights as Flagstone Biscuits, Primula Scotica Cup Cakes, and Dunnet Head Layer Cake. We are most grateful to Helen Gunn for leading this enterprise.

The first weekend in August proved to be a great example of the varied activities and support that CHS provides for visitors, locals and our partners alike. Lady Thurso kicked off the weekend when the Castlehill Spinning Group took part in a 'Spinning Challenge' with another spinning group based in Stanley in the Falkland Islands. The challenge was to spin yarn from local wool, then knit a series of squares to an agreed pattern, which would then be stitched together to form a cushion cover. Nothing too unusual about that you might think, until you realise this was all done live, on air, via an internet video link!

Other achievements that weekend included:

- Information received on local broch sites, harbour building, and past generations' close ties with the export of flagstone by sea,
- Plaudits received from visitors on the wonderful garden,
- Useful info received on objects in our collection,
- Help given to visitors on their forebears from 1880s in this area using some of our archived documents,
- Help given to people trying to track down Dunnet ancestors.
- Geological help provided for a local man who had found an unusual stone on his land, which proved to have originated on Morven and had been moved here in the Ice Age.

The success of the Spinning Challenge led to what we believe was a truly unique 'first of a kind' event in October. Ann Johnson undertook much research and hard work in establishing contact with like-minded spinning groups in each of the seven continents, setting the scene for a global 'Spinning Challenge'.

Setting up such an event presented quite a few challenges, not least co-ordinating activities across the various time zones however by kicking off at 9am a variety of contacts were made across the globe through-out the day, culminating in a 'golden hour' at 6pm when representatives from all seven continents were brought on line together - Calgary in Canada (North America), Brazil (South America) Pretoria, South Africa (Africa), Kerala in India (Asia), New Zealand (Australia), Halley Base Camp, British Antarctic Expedition (Antarctica), and of course ourselves in Castletown (Europe). Quite a result, and attracted some very positive media attention.

Support to visitors and locals undertaking genealogical research features frequently in our activities and the following example is worthy of detailed mention. Meryl Smith of Mansfield, Victoria, Australia contacted Castletown Heritage with a request for local directions in the Orlig area. Her planned trip to Scotland was to photograph as many sites of importance to her family, the Smiths of Orlig. Her particular branch of the Smith family lived in Hayfield farm just outside Castletown village. Meryl was keen to see the house, the farm and the location of the flagstone quarries owned by her forebears. Orlig House was another place on her list, where she hoped to sketch and take photos.

As luck would have it, Hayfield farm is now owned by CHS committee member Muriel Murray. Meryl was given a personal tour of the original house, now part of the farm buildings. Arrangements were also made for her to visit Orlig House where her grandmother was brought up and she spent several hours in the archive at Castlehill Heritage Centre where artefacts, documents and newspaper articles about the Smith family were available for her to study.

Meryl has kindly given us a copy of her work on the Smith family entitled "*Smith History - Caithness to Mansfield*", which will doubtless prove a useful asset to future researchers into family history.

This was in fact the second time in as many months that an Australian with Orlig roots was able to find their experience of Homecoming greatly enhanced by their visit to Castlehill Heritage Centre and the helpful information and local knowledge that we can offer.

Each year for past three years we have organised a hands-on science themed workshop aimed at 5-13 year olds and their parents. Last year's event in August explored the mysterious forces of the wind, which powered the iconic water pump in the Castlehill flagstone quarry workings. The hands-on activities included building a model wind turbine, with the aim of lifting a small weight through a fixed distance in as short a time as possible, using hair dryers for the "wind". As usual, it proved to be a great opportunity for some science themed bonding time with Dad/Mum!

Our summer exhibition explored how the Flagstone Industry shaped the social history of Castletown and the Parish of Orlig. Visitors were able to discover life as a flagstone worker in the 18th and 18th century, when the robust, high quality flagstone from the local quarries was exported as far afield as Argentina and Australia. Also on display were

special features on the work of the Bumble Bee Conservation Trust, the Patchwork Meadow (a tapestry for our times) and fossils.

In September we staged an evening's entertainment from the 1940s. The event followed the format of the 'Welcome Home' concerts organised in the village to raise funds for the war effort and to show appreciation for local servicemen and women returning home on leave in the course of the war. Music of the 40s was courtesy of the Caithness Big Band, and the pupils of Primary 6/7 from Castletown Primary School dazzled us all with their unique brand of musical enthusiasm. Comedy sketches, close harmony singing, highland dance routines, readings of contemporary news articles and personal accounts all added to the fun. Who could forget our whistling diva Issy Currie leading the community singing to round off the evening, supported by her troupe of 'Land Girls'.

The inspiration for the event was down to our resident impresario Muriel Murray who put in many hours of research to source material from the original concerts. Thanks must also go to the other members of the committee and friends who helped on the night and baked the delicious rock buns for the half-time tea!

During Archaeology week in October we worked in partnership with the Caithness Archaeological Trust to offer a chance for the public to come to Castlehill Heritage and experience archaeological finds analysis - including wet-sieving, sorting, dry-sieving, analysing and recording soil samples from recent excavations in Caithness.

We also called on the services of local master craftsman, George Gunn, to lead one of our dry stone dyking workshops, which are a regular feature in our traditional skills workshop programme and remain as popular as ever. The participants started construction of a wall that will form part of the northern boundary of the Castlehill Heritage Centre policies. If anyone wants to help finish it off, come along to our next workshop!

Our autumn exhibition - *Needles, Shuttles and All* - explored the fascinating world of needles, thread, thimbles, awls, brads, looms, sewing machines, knitting machines, lasts, patterns and all sorts of intriguing equipment and devices. Using our archive material we were able to present information about the trades that relied on them, and the hobbies and pastimes that used them.

As is often the case, by the end of the exhibition we had amassed several new artefacts, prompted by people's memories being jogged and no doubt a lingering desire to clear out the attic! We are, as always, deeply grateful for all donations received, all of which help to enrich our knowledge and understanding of the social history of our community.

As so much effort had gone in to staging the World War II concert we didn't hold one of our Bothy Nights last year, however we will probably return to this popular format again in the future, especially if some new volunteer performers willing to take part come forward. Britain's Got Talent it isn't, but it has always been an enjoyable evening.

We have held a pre-Christmas craft sale every year since 2009 and it has proved to be a good opportunity for local craftspeople and artists to showcase their talent. They have always been successful, creating much valued income and footfall for the Centre. When first launched they were a relatively novel concept, however events of this nature are now very common in Caithness, especially near Christmas time, and this impacts the viability of our event. We haven't taken any decision yet but we are exploring how the concept could be refreshed, or perhaps rested for a while.

Our traditional festive Boxing Day Opening however continues to thrive and grow. Enhancing the experience this time was an amazing display of the artwork done during the year by students of Castlehill Art Group under their tutor Helen Moore. The opening drew a large gathering of members, friends and holiday visitors for some mulled wine, mincemeat pies and a generous helping of all round bonhomie.

But the big news on Boxing Day was the announcement by our Chairman Hugh of the outcome from the recent quality grading of Castlehill Heritage Centre by Visit Scotland – we had been awarded THREE stars! The plaque is proudly displayed at the main garden entrance, and we will be using the logo wherever we can maximise benefit from the Visit Scotland brand. Our target for this year is to achieve *four* stars, and we have already put most of the necessary improvements in place, such as name badges for hosting staff.

The driver for a Visit Scotland grading came from our long felt desire to improve the signage directing visitors to Castlehill. Grading is a pre-requisite to receiving permission from Highland Council to erect heritage or visitor attraction signage on the roadway. Hopefully within the next couple of weeks our new signs, *complete with Gaelic*, will be

erected at the south and north end of Harbour road, at a cost of over £1500. We are confident the investment will be worthwhile.

The end of January saw the launch of a series of four evening talks, all of which have been extremely well supported. David Glass from Brough set a very high standard with his talk on the *Drove Roads of Caithness and Sutherland*. This linked very neatly with the next presentation by Jenny Bruce entitled '*Shepherds in the Straths*', which explored the migration of borders shepherds and their families to Caithness and Sutherland in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

In his talk "*HOUSED ICE - From Sherbet to Salmon, Ancient Mesopotamia To Modern Caithness*" George Bethune revealed the fascinating history of ice as a product and the buildings used to preserve it for use. The series was rounded off last week by Professor Donna Heddle from the UHI Centre for Nordic Studies in Orkney, who was quite provocative in her challenge to Caithness to make the most of it's Nordic history in promoting the county.

Our current exhibition explores the linkage of our community to the sea - from the arrival of early Viking settlers, to the export and import of foodstuffs, raw materials and finished products, villains, heroes, wrecks and rescues from the 16th century to modern day, all with a particular focus on the social history of the people involved.

Sticking with the maritime theme I must also make mention of the 'Postcardsea' arty fundraiser organised by local artists, Joanne B Kaar & Liz O'Donnell to raise funds for Brough Bay Association & Castletown Heritage Society. They invited the public to get arty and send them postcard size artworks inspired by the sea. This is already proving to be very popular with 170 locals taking up the challenge to get arty, as well as artists from as far away as Taiwan, New Zealand, Brazil, USA and Tasmania. The closing date for entries is 20th June. We are planning to host an exhibition of the work here at Castlehill, launching it with a special opening night on the 2nd July.

The sea inspired artworks will be for sale by secret silent auction during the month of July, and all the proceeds going to the two groups, both run by volunteers. Friends of Castletown Heritage Society, Brough Bay Association and artists will be invited to the

Postcardsea opening night preview on the 2nd July and evening event, invites will be e-mailed out nearer the time.

Looking forward the programme for the 2014-15 session is already beginning to take shape.

- Sat 3 May – Rowing Day at Castlehill – Wick Coastal Rowing Club. Teas and coffee available throughout the day at Castlehill heritage Centre.
- In June we will once again be taking part in the Wild North Festival. Activities currently planned include:
 - Butterfly Exhibition
 - Wildlife Exhibition
 - Year of Homecoming 2014 themed Heritage Garden Display
- On October we have invited internationally renowned Elaine Lindsay from the Guild of Straw Craftsmen to lead another hands-on workshop demonstrating how to make 'corn dollys' and other traditional handicrafts using straw as the base material.
- Other events potentially in the pipeline include:
 - Thatching - This practical workshop will be held in conjunction with Mary Anne's cottage at Dunnet.
 - Dry Stone Dyking
 - Book Binding - Very popular last time we ran this.
 - Creative Writing -
 - Primitive photography – practical workshop using some of our photographic artefacts.

I am delighted to report that we also have four exciting new projects underway, for delivery towards the end of the year and into next year.

The first is a major archaeological themed project examining remarkable features in the local landscape recently revealed during a LiDAR survey (3D laser scanning from aircraft) undertaken as part of the preparatory work for wind farm development in Caithness. The survey revealed some of the best preserved prehistoric landscapes in the UK, much of it previously unrecorded, including extensive evidence of farming and settlement at least 3500 years old. Working in partnership with AOC Archaeology, the proposed project will offer volunteers from the local community the opportunity to take part in the investigation

and interpretation of the data and revealed landscapes. If we are successful in our funding application to the Heritage Lottery Fund it will be one of the first such community projects of its kind in Scotland. This is where you can help. Part of the funding pre-qualification requires us to demonstrate that we have consulted with the local community. We have received several letters already from local organisations, however it would be incredibly helpful if you, as individuals, felt able to lend your support by signing the survey sheet, which I will circulate among you.

The second event will explore and celebrate a fascinating aspect of our Viking heritage – Audrunn the Deep-Minded's epic ninth century journey from Caithness to Iceland.

Starting in the autumn, we aim to deliver a series of interactive talks and workshops exploring the legend of Audrunn the Deep-Minded and the lives and activities of contemporary Viking society. The project will engage local schools in musical and literary interpretations, and we aim to stage an exhibition featuring craft, archaeological and scientific interpretations on the theme of Viking society, boats and navigation methods. Funding applications are again underway, in what is proving to be a very competitive environment.

The third project is personally rather exciting. I will be representing CHS as one of six individuals selected from across Scotland to take part in a week long Cultural Heritage Interpretation and Sustainable Tourism (CHIST) funded exchange programme in Iceland. During the first part of the visit we will spend two days practising hands on techniques for the repair and treatment of ancient and protected traditional Icelandic turf buildings. The second half of the week will include lectures on Cultural Heritage Management in Iceland, traditional Icelandic building methods, local archaeology and visits to heritage centres and museums in the north of Iceland. I hope to bring back knowledge and experience I can subsequently share in talks and workshops here at Castlehill. I also hope to visit the site where Audrunn the Deep Minded settled and set up a local community.

The fourth, highly topical project will get underway shortly. Alan Bruce is about to launch an on line blog featuring the social history of the local community during the period of World War One. Alan will say a few words to explain more fully.

In conclusion, I wish to express my thanks to my fellow members and past members of the outgoing committee - Chairman Hugh Crowden, treasurer John Crowden, secretary Jayne Blackburn, and committee members Muriel Murray, Roy Blackburn, Alan Bruce, Liz Geddes, Julie Geddes and Helen Gunn. All of these people have brought a valuable and diverse range of skills and experience to bear in the running of the Society.

Thanks must go also to all the organisations that regularly use our premises for their continued support:

- Dunnet Forestry Trust
- North Highland Woodturners Association
- Caithness Amateur Radio Club
- Caithness Astronomy Group
- Caithness Archaeology Trust
- Caithness Birds
- Castlehill Archaeology Club
- Castlehill Artists
- Castlehill Spinning Group

If I have missed anyone out it is not deliberate. Put it down to a senior moment and a sure indication that I have talked for too long. So I would just like to round off by making a special mention of the hard work and passion of our volunteer gardener Irene Wares who most certainly has the magic touch with the green fingers. The Heritage Garden received much praise over the year, and you have to admit, it is a lovely place to spend some time on a sunny day.

Ladies and gentlemen, I have every confidence that with the support and commitment of those present we will emerge this evening with a strong committee to drive the Society forward for the coming year. Thank you.

Neil Buchan

Vice Chairman

Castletown Heritage Society

23 April 2014