

**CASTLETOWN HERITAGE SOCIETY
AGM 15 OCTOBER 2020**

Chairman's Report

Welcome to the 2020 Annual General Meeting of Castletown Heritage Society.

The 2020 AGM was originally scheduled to be held on 21 April, however this had to be cancelled due to the Covid -19 pandemic. The impact of Covid remains very much with us and the current Scottish Government restrictions preclude the possibility of holding a physical meeting, hence the decision to hold a virtual AGM using the Zoom video conferencing platform. Thank you all for agreeing to take part in this way.

In view of the escalating Covid situation, the 2019/20 programme of activities was curtailed on 19 March 2020 when I took the decision to close Castlehill Heritage Centre to the public. This would be the first time the Centre has not opened all year round since we formally opened the Centre in 2007. The whole nation was subsequently placed into 'Lockdown' on 23 March by the UK Prime Minister.

As at today the Centre remains closed to the public. Appropriate risk assessments and protocols have been implemented to support maintenance and security of the Centre during the shutdown period. Whilst current advice and guidelines published by the Scottish Parliament would technically permit the Centre to reopen, the judgement of the Management Committee is that due to the nature of the activities carried out at the Centre the risks are not yet fully manageable. Many of the Society volunteers and the Management Committee are of pensionable age plus, and are understandably nervous about being exposed to visitors from throughout the UK and beyond, some of whom (based on media reports and local experience) may not comply with hygiene, distancing and similar precautionary requirements. The situation regarding a reopening date is under continuous review and updates will be regularly posted on our website, however the base assumption is that the Centre will be closed until Easter 2021.

Covid apart, 2019 – 20 was actually a very good operating year for the Society. Our visitor numbers were up, even accounting for a noticeable drop off in footfall from December as the Covid pandemic started to bite. In total some 1,442 people were recorded visiting or attending activities at Castlehill during the period. Given that not everyone signs the Visitors Book, despite our best endeavours to encourage them to do so, it is not unreasonable to estimate that 2,000 – 2,300 is nearer the mark, up on the 1,800 – 2,000 estimate the previous year. What is interesting to note is that a number of visitors reported that they were returning to the area having previously passed through on the NC500. Hopefully this trend will continue.

Analysis of the Visitors Book and workshop records reveals that 58% of the visitors were local, 33% came from elsewhere in the UK, and the remainder from 15 different countries around the world. The largest overseas visitor region was the USA, followed by Germany then Holland and Canada. We even had a visitor from Ecuador, a first from there I think.

Local	Scotland	England	Wales	Ireland	Netherlands	Germany	Switzerland	Canada	USA	Australia	Sweden	Norway	France	S Africa	Denmark	Spain	NZ	Ecuador	Belguim	Undefined
835	225	234	9	4	17	23	9	17	28	11	2	4	6	3	1	5	1	1	2	4

We had a number of Group visits, including pupils from Castletown and Canisbay Primary Schools, the Castletown Rainbow Guides, the National Trust for Scotland Members Group (Highland Area), and a coach tour.

Activities and achievements

Major activities and achievements during the year included a series of themed exhibitions. The first carried over from the end of the previous period and was entitled "Pastimes from Past Times". This explored how local people spent their leisure hours in times gone by. From sport to music, handicrafts, and everything in between, the exhibition featured articles, photographs and artefacts from recent times to a bygone age. The next exhibition portrayed the life and times of "McIvor & Allan", a firm of Wood Chip Carvers that were based in Castletown. Their skill and craftsmanship was brought to life through a fascinating display which included examples of their exquisite, locally made products, the quality and popularity of which led to exports all around the world.

Over the summer months our ever popular exhibition on the Caithness Flagstone Industry was aimed at visiting tourists in conjunction with the adjacent Flagstone Trail. The "Getting The Message Across" exhibition explored how we have communicated through the ages - from symbols and letters to the rapid technological changes in the 20th Century. On display were artefacts, photographs and stories exploring the fascinating technical and social history of communication in Caithness, including local Post Office memorabilia and military communication ephemera.

Running in parallel with these exhibitions were two smaller displays. The first celebrated 100 years of Woman's Suffrage and featured the lives of a number of prominent local women and their influence on the society of the times. This exhibition was carried over from the previous year's programme due to its popularity and ran for several months. It was followed in the summer by a fascinating exhibition exploring the local maritime heritage including artefacts, stories, charts and models, from the 16th century to the modern day.

The Rolls-Royce Merlin Engine recovered from a crashed WWII Hurricane aircraft that had been based at RAF Castletown airfield, together with the associated story surrounding the exploits of the pilot's later involvement with the "Great Escape" from Stalag Luft 3, continues to be much admired by visitors to the Heritage Centre.

Consistent with the objective of preserving vernacular and traditional skills, the Society held four hands-on skills workshops during the period. The first was a series of Pottery Bowl workshops, the second a series of Millinery workshops focused on the production of locally themed hats and headwear. A workshop for beginners to learn the basic skills and techniques of Crochet proved very popular. Participants made "granny squares" from which it was possible to create a blanket, hat, pot holder, purse, tote bag and much more.

Following the popularity of the two highly successful Smithing/Metalworking workshops held the previous year, two further full day workshops took place during the summer. With the exception of the Crochet workshop, all workshops were suitable for both beginners and more experienced practitioners.

A highlight in June was a truly fascinating display and slide show presentation by ninety-eight year old F/Lt Don Mason RAFVR (Ret) BEM, about his experiences and exploits as a bomber pilot and navigator during WWII. The presentation was recorded on video, and DVD copies were provided to Don for distribution to local schools.

During the period the Society successfully formed a link with the University of the Highlands & Islands whereby support is being provided to a PhD student researching the relationship between local heritage and tourism in communities around the route of the North Coast 500. Julian has been fully engaged with Society activities and the local community, with some of the scheduled *Living Landscapes of Castletown* activities being redesigned to be Covid-friendly.

Our cream teas in August were once again extremely popular, and much thanks must go to Helen Gunn and Hugh Crowden for organising these, plus everyone who assisted with baking and serving on the day.

A highlight during September was the hosting of the wedding of Stephen Fraser and Kara MacLennan at Castlehill Heritage Centre. The wedding ceremony took place in the main exhibition space, which they had transformed into a lovely silk clad grotto. After the ceremony they signed the register in glorious sunshine on the patio, before posing for photographs in and around our lovely heritage garden whilst the guests enjoyed drinks and canapes in the sunshine. We wish them every happiness in their married life together. This was the second time we have hosted a wedding at Castlehill and we are already in discussion with another local couple wishing to tie the knot here in the summer of 2021, Covid permitting of course.

Our winter programme of evening talks once again proved very popular. In January Muriel Murray revealed the fascinating story of the Williamsons of Banniskirk's struggle against Napoleon Bonaparte. In February Norse Stone Ltd spoke about the challenges of Caithness Flagstone production at Lieurary Quarry and the techniques used to create their unique products. In the beginning of March UHI PhD student Julian Grant presented an overview of his research to date and plans for the remainder of the project. A prestige talk was to be given following the April AGM by Duncan Macniven CBE who was Registrar General for Scotland from 2003 to 2011. Duncan's talk was to explore Scotland's demography since 1755, with special reference to Caithness and it is hoped to reschedule Duncan's talk for a later date.

The Monday night art class goes from strength to strength. Not to be thwarted by the closure, Helen Moore put in a lot of effort to set up and run a series of on-line tuition sessions which have been highly successful and popular. This format will probably continue over the coming winter period.

The Society continued to host within Castlehill Heritage Centre, activities and meetings by other local like-minded community groups, such as the Caithness Astronomy Group, North Highland Woodturners Association, Dunnet Forestry Trust, Castlehill Artists, and the Scottish Ornithological Club. We are very grateful for their support.

Other major activities included:

- Woodturning demonstrations and open day;
- Activity day with the local Rainbow Guide group;
- International collaboration project – a craft paper aeroplane and early transatlantic flight information exchange with the Old Cottage Hospital Museum and Community Centre at Bonne Bay, Norris Point, Newfoundland, undertaken in conjunction with local artist Joanne Kaar;
- Archaeology project development;
- Restoration of the boat in the heritage garden;
- Receipt of a Caithness Flagstone water tank donated by Fiona Mackenzie;
- Boxing Day Special Opening.

Building fabric and infrastructure.

During the year the committee and volunteers have carried out maintenance to the Heritage Centre. Apart from some running repairs to the log boiler system there are no major failures or issues to report.

Thanks must go to our log boiler stokers, Hugh, Roy, Neil, Alan, Alex and Brian Campbell for their sterling effort throughout the year, and to Gordon Buchan and James Henderson for the lend of the tractor and trailer respectively for the log runs to Dunnet Forest. In that respect I must also thank all those who turned out to load and unload the trailer, and stack the logs in the wood store, not least our newest volunteer Mathew Murray. It's hard work but good exercise, and we have it down to a fine art!

The log boiler was shut down when the building was closed up in March to avoid unnecessary log consumption and minimise Covid exposure risk to our team. Electric radiators on thermostats and time switches have been deployed in the hall and archive room to keep the building and documents safe and dry. This will have had a slight impact on our electricity usage in the period. The boiler is now being run once a week over the winter period.

Improvements include the purchase of a new High Definition LCD projector and electric screen, the combination of which gives superb pictures and videos for presentations and talks. A new high definition laptop completes the set. We have also invested in professional audio loop equipment to make talks and presentations more accessible and enjoyable for visitors with hearing aids. Thanks to Covid installation has been delayed, but we hope to complete this soon.

Future plans

Subject to reopening, future plans for physical activities at Castlehill post Easter include:

- An exhibition entitled “The Roaring Twenties” exploring the day to day life in the village of Castletown and the parish of Orlig during the 1920s. This exhibition was actually stablished mid-March, but was only open to the public for a few days before the Centre was closed;
- A number of other different exhibitions, yet to be decided;
- Ceramic pottery workshop;
- Metalwork/Blacksmithing workshop;
- Woodturning demonstration and woodturning Open Day;
- Weekly art classes;
- Evening events by the Caithness Astronomy Group and Scottish Ornithologists' Club;
- Boxing Day Open Day;
- Development of coach tour visits and wedding/blessing ceremony opportunities;
- Curation and display of the Jack Saxon fossil collection;
- and a series of winter evening talks.

However, we are not going to sit still during our enforced closure. One thing the Covid situation has brought into sharp focus is the need to better embrace digital platforms to increase our virtual presence. We actually have a real opportunity to find innovative ways to get our message out there, and potentially attract greater interest in, and following of, the Society’s activities. We have already started using Zoom video conferencing for committee meetings and discussion sessions, and these have proven to be very successful.

The committee have started working on a number of digital projects, including an interactive virtual walk through Castletown featuring ten prominent buildings and their story through time, presented through images and text. A Castletown Heritage Society YouTube channel has been established, onto which it is proposed to load short videos featuring some of our artefacts, talks, exhibitions and demonstrations. We are similarly planning to create audio podcasts as these have been proven by others to be particularly successful in a heritage context. We are also considering setting up an on-line exhibition of works from the Monday Night Art Group. We already have a rich archive of information, artefacts, talks and workshops so there is lots of potential for production of digital material – but we do recognise that we have to walk before we run!

The Society has recently joined Museums and Heritage Highland, a new organisation formed in March 2019. Membership includes include museums, galleries and heritage organisations of all sizes from across Highland region. MHH works to promote collaborative working and capacity building; promoting partnership opportunities that support members to achieve their purpose and to be sustainable and resilient in challenging times. Membership has already proven to be extremely helpful, with access to digital platform training webinars and excellent networking contacts.

The Society has submitted an entry into the 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. If selected, ours will feature the amazing Custer Tablecloth. Do visit the [Highland Objects website](#) and vote for us!

Acknowledgements

Finally, I would like to express my thanks to the outgoing committee members who have served this year, and agreed to remain in post pending arrangement of the deferred AGM. Vice Chairman Roy Blackburn, Treasurer Helen Gunn, Secretary Jayne Blackburn, and committee members Muriel Murray, Hugh Crowden, Alex Groves, Alice Morrison, Alan Bruce (who was seconded during the year) and Elspet Chapman.

They have each used their various skills, experience, enthusiasm and hard work to ensure the continuing success of the Society. Our web site is updated and managed by myself and our Facebook page is managed by Alex - we are grateful to both, especially as these will be especially important media for maintaining the Society's presence as we move forward.

A special thanks must go to Irene Wares for the huge amount of work she puts in to make the garden look so impressive. She continued to work - and as she herself put it 'self-isolate' - in the garden during the closure and it looks as good as always – just a shame we weren't able to share it with visitors.

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

Neil Buchan, Chairman