

## Chairman's Report 2018 - 2019

Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the Annual General Meeting of Castletown Heritage Society. Thank you for your support this evening. I have tried to keep my report as concise as possible but there is quite a lot of information to report to you.

**Visitors:** As usual we had visitors from all areas of the globe and a first this year, we had a Gurkha from Nepal. The best estimate for visitor numbers is between 1800 and 2000, an increase from the previous year's 1500. The NC500 is probably one reason for the increase.

Group visits included: Bower school, Castletown school, people from an Industrial Archaeology Conference held in Wick, Ormlie Community Association, Institute of Engineers and Rainbows & Brownies for a Halloween event.

**Exhibitions:** This year were:

**Castletown and District Hits the Headlines:** An exhibition featuring newspaper articles from both home and abroad, dating back to 1800s.

**Flagstone Industry:** Our usual summer exhibition aimed at the visiting tourists in conjunction with the Flagstone Trail.

**Castletown Recalls – WWI:** An exhibition featuring what life was like for those at home and those serving abroad.

**Pastimes From Past Times:** The current exhibition explores how local people spent their leisure hours in times gone by. From sport, music, handicrafts, and everything in between.

**Formidable Females:** This exhibition celebrates 100 years of woman's suffrage in 2018 and features the lives of some prominent local women and their influence on the society of the times. It is still set up in the lab area since it has proved very popular.

**WWII Merlin Engine:** This continues to be very popular with our visitors. Unfortunately Halkirk will probably want it back in the near future.

**Activities:** Over the last year we had a number of different activities.

**“Revealing the Mysteries of Caithness” - May.** An evening event by Garance Warburton, Community Engagement Officer at the Caithness Archive, exploring the secrets of Orlig parish.

**Smithing Workshop - July:** Participants were instructed by an experienced metal worker on the skills of heating and shaping metal and a variety of items were produced.

**August Sunday Cream Teas:** Returned by popular demand, they were as delicious as ever and a great success. Our sincere thanks once again to Helen Gunn and Hugh Crowden for all their hard work.

**BBC – Aug:** The BBC were again at Castlehill as part of their ‘Home Front Heroes’ series in which a celebrity finds out about the life of one of their relatives who lived through the Second World War. The personality proved to be a Blue Peter presenter called Radzi Chinyanganya, whose grandmother ran a farm at Strathcoul, Calder, before moving to Dundee. Muriel and Morris Pottinger provided background information on the role of farmers during WWII for the film makers, who were particularly struck by the splendour of the heritage garden at Castlehill. The programme was broadcast in November.

**Brooch Making – Sept:** Participants joined with local artist Joanne Kaar in making a series of unique brooches inspired by the landscape and combined string making techniques with contemporary design.

**Bat Talk & Walk - Sept:** Graeme Hull gave an evening talk and presentation about Scottish bats and this was followed by a walk around the neighbouring woodland seeking out our local bats using special detectors. Unfortunately they must have had advance warning – none were sighted!

**Boxing Day:** Our traditional Boxing Day afternoon opening, featuring a warm welcome, mince pies, and mulled wine was a success yet again.

**Historic Environment Record Workshop – March:** HC’s database of all known heritage is the Historic Environment Record – it provides information on sites and finds throughout the Highlands. Susan Kruse ran a workshop on how to use it and how to contribute to it.

**Winter Evening Talks:** This year these were:

- 12 Feb – “Castletown Lass to Australian Pioneer” – this talk was given by Muriel and told the fascinating story of Frances Purves from Thurdistoft Farm, 1829 – 1900.
- 26 March – “Escape and Evade” – F/Lt Don Mason BEM RAFVR (Ret), WWII veteran, gave a very interesting talk about a serviceman’s duty during WWII to evade capture and, if the worst happened, to escape. He focused on the escape lines set up from Belgium, across the Pyrenees and through Spain to Gibraltar.
- Tonight, following this AGM meeting, Ian MacLean of the Caithness Broch Project, will be our guest speaker and will be talking to us about plans to recreate a traditional broch in the County.

**Outreach:** Muriel continues to give talks to groups who request them. Jayne and I gave a talk on the Rise & Fall of the Caithness Flagstone Industry to an Industrial Archaeology Conference in Wick. In addition, to enable us to play an active role in encouraging tourism in the area, Jayne represents us at the Caithness Heritage Forum and at CASVAG.

**Building Improvements:** Main items of expenditure and interest were:

- IT upgrade: we replaced one of our desktop computers with a new one and also purchased a new A3 colour laser printer and an A3 laminator. We will also be purchasing a new projector in the future.
- In July we had a group of visiting volunteers from HIE who set about painting the Stroma Yawl and also some external parts of the building.
- Decoration of the main hall and office took place in January 2019.

**4 Star Award:** We were delighted when last year Castlehill Heritage Centre was awarded a **4 Star** grading under the **Visit Scotland Visitor Attraction Scheme**. The upgrading reflects the hard work by the Society and its supporters to continuously improve both the visitor experience and the general facilities at Castlehill since being awarded 3 Stars in Dec 2013.

The grading report makes particular mention of the hospitality, friendliness, service and efficiency of our volunteers manning the centre, grading these aspects as 5 Star - *exceptional*. Similarly graded *exceptional* were the cleanliness of the centre and the grounds. The garden merited a special mention as *looking superb* and creates an excellent feature to greet visitors on arrival. Well done everyone!

We also welcomed the suggestions for further improvement included within the report and we have been working through these and continue to do so. Examples to date include: improvements to the web site; better car park and entrance signage – some has been done and some is in hand and improved lighting in the toilets. Recently, Neil has been working on improvements to the disabled toilet, including fitting an alarm. In addition, we have purchased a wheelchair which is available for use by our visitors.

**Future Plans and Activities:** These Include:

Proposed far end refurbishment – once the Merlin engine has gone. Plans are at a very early stage but the aim is to utilise the area for additional displays.

- Monday evening art classes with Helen Moore
- Basket making demonstration – 20 & 21 April
- McIvor and Allan exhibition – next week or two
- Pottery Workshop – 4, 11 & 18 May (fully booked)
- Millinery Workshop – 1, 8 & 15 June (nearly fully booked)
- Summer flagstone exhibition
- Smithy Workshop – July 13 – some places available
- The traditional cream teas on August Sundays
- Woodturners Open Day – Sunday 25 August

- Weddings – August and September
- Crochet Workshop – October
- Demonstration day by the wood turners – Sept ??
- Caithness Astronomy Group public events.
- Scottish Ornithologists' Club public evenings.
- During the winter months we will most likely be planning another series of evening talks.

**Word of Thanks:** I would like to express my thanks to the outgoing committee members who have served this year. Vice Chairman **Elspet Chapman**, Treasurer **Helen Gunn**, Secretary **Jayne Blackburn**, and committee members **Muriel Murray**, **Hugh Crowden**, **Neil Buchan**, **Alex Groves**, **Graeme Hull**, **Liz Geddes**, **Alice Morrison**, and **Colin Robertson**.

They have 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 Neil and our Facebook page is managed Alex - we are grateful to both because these are important media for contacting and networking with people.

A special thanks to **Irene Wares** for the huge amount of work she does to make the garden look so stunning. It's a visitor attraction in its right!

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

**Members and Friends:** As you will be aware, all our members and friends receive regular updates on our activities from Jayne. However, we have many more 'friends' than actual paid up members and the committee has discussed various ideas for encouraging more people to become members of the Society. What we have come up with so far is to offer members a 15% discount on workshops and products and to hold a 'members evening' with refreshments and possibly some activity. Any other ideas for consideration would be welcomed – within reason! (after all, membership is only £5 – which incidentally we are not proposing to increase this year).

**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 for your attention.