

# Ross of Mull Historical Centre

## Newsletter

### Tigh na Rois

Visitor Centre  
Bunessan, Isle of Mull

October 2012

### The Return of the Mariota Stone

The return to the Ross of Mull of the beautiful but vandalised Mariota Stone, after it had been restored by Historic Scotland, made for a memorable year. May 14 was the memorable day when the Historic Scotland conservation team delivered it to Tigh na Rois. The plan was to display the stone in a place where plenty of people could see it, before it went 'home' to Kilvickeon Churchyard. Dating from about 1500, this carved grave-slab is a fine example of the West Highland School of carving. It is unusual because, as well as pictorial decoration (two creatures – possibly a lion and a hare – and a foliated cross) it has an inscription – some of which is lost.

The Latin reads

HIC IACET MARIOTA FILIA...

Here lies Mariota the daughter of ...

As it was trundled carefully into the Historical Centre, passing schoolchildren already showed an interest. During the week that followed, the Centre hosted a mini-festival in its honour. Old and young (from 4 to 84) were involved, with a special meeting of Remembering the Ross and two visits from Bunessan School. The children listened to an account of what we know about the stone and the time when it was carved, asked some excellent questions, and did their best to solve 'The Mariota Mystery'. A number of them were pleased to see the accompanying display about Anna MacLean of Iona. This arose from the Historic Scotland Carved Identities project, and an exploration of the Nunnery in Iona and its story by local Brownie and Rainbow groups and Jan Sutch Pickard as a storyteller. Photographs and poems and some great fabric pictures of 'Abbess Anna' were then put on display in the Centre and Bunessan Bakehouse. Sadly we don't have a portrait of Mariota – but some use their imaginations!

The week also included a fascinating talk by calligrapher Stephen Raw on The Art of Remembering, and a visit to Kilvickeon Churchyard, led by Sue Reed and Anita Tunstall, who are surveying the burial stones there. It was rounded off by a ceilidh with music and poetry in Bunessan Hall – the second half of an evening shared with a concert given by the Young Pipers of Mull. There was something very appropriate about this linking of history and tradition with the hopes of a new generation.



Throughout June visits to the Centre included the opportunity to see the Stone. A number of visitors said they had come because they had heard it was on display. Many commented on its unique beauty. In July the stone was carefully transported back to Kilvickeon, and placed in the big chest built to protect it from the elements – and from further falls of rubble from the ruined church – now in a precarious state. A simply carved baulk of timber now marks Mariota's grave within its walls. On July 20 the annual Gaelic/English service, held in Kilvickeon Churchyard, drew large numbers, including BBC Alba. The Mull Gaelic Choir and Folk from the Ross sang, Eleanor MacDougall preached and the Revd Linda Pollock said prayers rededicating this stone, which is part of our history.

Jan Sutch Pickard

## Centre News

This season has been a quieter one than usual with fewer visitors to the Centre. This may have been partly due to the recession but we were certainly affected by having the best summer for many years. It was beach weather for the best part of five months and, not surprisingly, people weren't looking for indoor activities!

Meanwhile, our excellent team of committed volunteers carried on keeping the Centre a welcoming place to be. They helped many visitors in search of their ancestors even, on one occasion, driving a family from Canada around the Ross looking for traces of their forbears. Our thanks are due to Anne Baxter, Brik Halcrow, Catherine McGarva, Emily Wilkins, Helen Crosher, Jan Sutch Pickard, Jenny Wright, Shirley Blacoe and Tessa Howell. Between them, they have ensured that the Centre has been kept open with scarcely a gap.

As the season draws to a close, we look forward to a happy night celebrating the season with the volunteers, as honoured guests, meeting with Directors and others who give support that guarantees the continued success of the Centre.

Although the Centre will be closed to the public from November to the end of March, it will continue to be a place of work for the Local Development Officer, Morven Gibson and the Ross of Mull and Iona Ranger, Emily Wilkins. Hopefully there will also be some winter projects being carried forward by volunteers, which will enhance the Centre's resources. If anyone would like to have access to the Centre over the winter we will do our best to make this possible and enquiries can be made to :

[enquiries@romhc.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@romhc.org.uk) or 01681 700620

Please remember the date of the  
**A.G.M.**  
Saturday 20th October at 11am at  
**Tigh Na Rois**  
if you are unable to attend please send in a  
Proxy form

## Remembering the Ross (and a bit more of Mull)

Our reminiscence group has continued to meet more or less monthly, over tea or coffee and cake, with a core membership of about ten, mostly folk who grew up on Mull. Some of the best meetings have included two generations from one family. There are also a number of interested listeners, mostly incomers, who are allowed to ask questions but not take over with their own reminiscences. Themes such as 'Harvest-time' are really just the start of a conversation that usually lasts an hour and a half, with very little prompting.

In May the group met as part of the celebrations of the return of the Mariota Stone – although our memories didn't actually stretch back to the 15th Century! Later in the summer members were present at the Annual Gaelic/English Service at Kilvickeon, which focused on the restored stone. In August twelve members and friends, sharing cars, had an enjoyable outing to Pennygael in the Past at Balevulin. Christine Leach made us very welcome, we spent time in the museum, hearing the stories of some of the items, and discussing the use of farming and fishing gear: we saw in the library the work that had gone into collecting and making available documents including reminiscences, such as those of Cathy Adam. A number of the group resolved to return, with more time to browse.

We still miss Cathy, but are grateful for the gift of her poetry book collection. This year we have also lost Maggie MacKechnie, who came occasionally until her health declined. We will try to keep her stories alive.

The existence of the group has opened up invitations to workshops (in other Bunessan locations) by a visiting storyteller and Scottish Ballet, this year. Such shared experiences stimulate lively memories. In October, at one of our meetings, we are looking forward to a conversation with Mairi MacArthur.

Jan Sutch Pickard

## Bunessan Show – we were there

The sun shone on the Show, the crowds lingered and took time to look at everything, and it was good to be there. We were grateful for help in moving the display boards and setting up. Three volunteers then took it in turns to provide a presence for the whole day (we could have used a few more) – and were privileged to have many interesting conversations, with local folk and visitors from far and wide (including a New Zealander whose father, Duncan MacDonald, had been head-teacher at Bunessan School from 1946-56).



We borrowed extra display boards in order to ask, 'Do you know anyone in these pictures?' (always a question worth asking) and to promote the 2013 Calendar - selling quite a few, as well as other publications.

There was also a lot of interest in a display about the return of the Mariota Stone, with pictures taken at every stage of the summer's celebrations. There are still some calendars left, at £3.50 each or 3 for £10. It's very good. Don't miss out!

Jan Sutch Pickard

### A BIG THANK YOU

to all the volunteers who have put in so much time and effort to keeping the Centre open all summer.

We close for the winter on Friday 26th October, however it will still be possible to visit the Centre by appointment.

## Maintenance Weekend

A very successful maintenance weekend was held over the weekend of 18th/19th August 2012.



The weather was kind and allowed us to get a fair bit of work done. Many thanks to Jenny, Brik, Shelagh, David, Nigel, Sandy, Ron and Shirley for their valiant efforts. Much strimming was done over the two days, overhanging vegetation at the back of the cottage was



cut back and gutters were cleared of leaves and debris. The outside walls were painted with white masonry paint, which fairly brightened up the place. The outside woodwork and window frames were also painted. The window frames which we didn't manage to finish were very kindly finished by Pete Davis, to whom

we are indebted. It was a fun couple of days, we all enjoyed ourselves and were very pleased with what was achieved. You can fairly see the difference when looking at the centre from the road. There are still a couple of small maintenance items outstanding, but these will be done as soon as circumstances and weather allow.

Sandy MacCallum

## A Bhliadhna a dh' fhalbh am Buntata : The Potato Famine

In the 1840's the population was increasing, many labourers had come to Scotland from Ireland to work. The kelp industry, which employed many people collapsed, causing considerable hardship. Then in 1846 a disease, for which there was no known cause nor "cure", suddenly blighted the potato crops. The Irish Potato Famine is well known from history lessons but it is less well known that this disease also occurred in other parts of the UK including Mull. Crop failures in the Highlands and Islands were not new but the impact of this failure lasted many years. Potatoes were central to peoples' diet, were used for fodder and were a significant part of the trading economy.

Crofters frequently supported their poorer neighbours the Cottars, so any crop failure affected the whole community. Rents on Iona were unexpectedly increased by 50%, causing further hardship. The impact of the potato blight on earnings was severe, the Destitution Commission of Iona & the Ross of Mull (January, 1847) found a population of 1,084 (82 Cottars), who were in a dire state with malnutrition, Cholera, Typhus and Dysentery rife.

In 1847 the Ross of Mull churchyard, on a single day in January, processed 15 funerals. Over a two month period, 80 people died in Bunnassan alone. It was noted that between Ardtun and Loch Scridain, every rock on the shore was upturned and stripped of limpets for food.

Soup Kitchens had been established and the following was recorded at Ardfenaig, February 1852: Mutton, Indian corn, oatmeal, turnip, fuel and cook's wages = 5s 8d (≤ 30p). This made soup, "a good wholesome meal" for 40-50 individuals, once-per-day.

Emigration was encouraged – but that's another story!

Catherine McGarva



## Chairman's report

This year has again been pretty much one of consolidation with no major projects, however our Remembering the Ross sessions are continuing and still proving popular with a hard core of attendees and we hope over the next few winter months to record a few more one to one sessions for the archive

One of the main highlights this year was the return of the Mariota Stone to Kilvickeon after a short stay inside at the centre itself. This led to a blessing of the stone at the annual outdoor service - very well led as usual by Eleanor Wagstaff, highlights from which were broadcast on BBC Alba.

Unfortunately the chapel itself is beginning to show its age and deteriorating quite badly, and supporting the stabilisation of the arch and general structure itself should become one of our priorities for next year .

However nearer home, the mill itself needs attention in the very near future if we are not to be faced with a large maintenance bill, the priorities being weeding and stabilizing the top of the walls to prevent ingress of water, both of these are major undertakings and closely related and at the moment beyond the capabilities of the management committee as it now stands.

We seriously need more directors who are willing to put in a little time if the Historical Centre is to remain a viable and constructive part of the community. Whilst the volunteers do a marvellous job and without whom we would not be where we are today, they do need the leadership of a few people who are prepared to accept some responsibility and to meet every couple of months for an hour or so to ensure the continuation of the centre.

David Greenhalgh, Chairman

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