

Ross of Mull Historical Centre Annual Report and Newsletter – Autumn 2020



Both 'closed' and 'open'

It will be strange to hold the AGM without being face-to-face with at least some of our Members and local supporters. Like every other organisation this year, our operation – and therefore of course our finances – have been hard-hit by the coronavirus pandemic, and the precautions necessary to keep our community safe.

Well before the lockdown, we made the decision not to open at Easter as usual, but to 'wait and see'. Gradually it became clear that it would not be wise or practicable to open this season. Of course, this was very disappointing, as the Historical Centre exists to preserve the history of the Ross, to gather the memories of its people, and to welcome visitors who want to learn more. Since the Museum was closed, we had to find ways of reaching out to our membership and a wider public.

This is an account of what we have done, to be 'open' even when 'closed'.

Communication

We have focused on the communication, because so much is still possible. Our **website** (www.romhc.org.uk) is now a much more attractive resource, because as well as excellent pictures it also has much more information and interesting articles, steadily being updated.

The number of visitors to our site has risen from an average of 167 per month during the first half of the year to an average of 258 per month (May to October 2020), with peaks of 271 in July and 273 in September.

Similarly, the number of pages viewed has risen from an average of 630 per month to an average of 751 per month, with peaks of 1084 in July and 965 in September.

Kirsty, our administrator, has included pictures and descriptions of all our publications and resources, and has enabled online payments via PayPal. This has resulted in sales to the tune of **£708**.



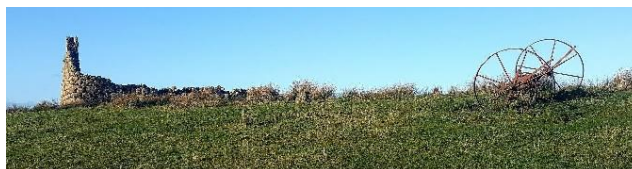
She has enhanced both outreach and sales with a series of **e-Newsletters**. The strap-line for these is **News and history from the Ross of Mull: Bringing you a snapshot of what has been happening behind the scenes at the Ross of Mull Historical Centre and which services and products are still available for you.**

For instance, the September e-Newsletter included an article 'Stories from the stones' by Judy Gibson, about Erraid in prehistory and the early middle ages. There was also an update on the Community Garden being set up in the grounds of the Centre, an invitation to make use of our genealogy service and a promotion of Stewart Cameron's 'A History of the Ross of Mull'. The e-Newsletters are emailed to nearly 200 members and other interested parties and we know from the response that they are raising awareness of what we are about.

If you are on our mailing list, and think you've not received these eNewsletters, check in your Spam or Promotions folder!

Genealogy Research

Since the beginning of April, we have received 14 requests by e-mail, resulting in interesting e-mail exchanges. Some gave rise to several hours of research – for others, the most helpful response was to point correspondents to another source of information. Several searches are still ongoing, and we, too, are learning a lot. So far, we have received **£277** in donations for this work.



Unpaid, but of great value in terms of local relationships, has been co-operation with the monthly magazine '**Round & About Mull and Iona**'. For three months this year its theme has been 'Past and Present'. Included were an account of the history of the Erraid lighthouse keepers' houses, the complex story of The Pedlar's Pool at Ardura, then a compilation of fact and stories from oral history from Uisken. For all these, research in our archives was involved and the contribution of the Centre was appreciated.



Community Garden & Volunteers

The Ross of Mull Historical Centre exists for the benefit of the community on the Ross. Therefore it seems very appropriate that part of our grounds is, under the auspices of SWMID, being opened up as a Community Garden, in which local people of any age can grow vegetables for their own households, and enjoy flowers and a place to sit in the sun. This project will link with the Nature Clubs being run with Bunessan School by the Ranger service. Recent energetic clearing of the ground between the river and the road has revealed how much useable land there is. The piles of brash are being chipped to help make paths around the site.

While volunteers from the Ross are involved in this exciting work, the Centre is also advertising for people (from anywhere on Mull) with time and enthusiasm to spend the next few months completing work on documenting Kilvickeon cemetery. This is another opportunity to volunteer (*see WANTED! ad below*).



Strange though much of the past year has been, and though the sign at our gate says CLOSED, the Centre has continued to find new ways to promote activity, open up communication and to encourage enthusiasm about our shared history.

AGM News

Due to Covid-19 we are unable to have a face-to-face meeting for our AGM. So, this year we will be conducting it via email (or letter). This is an acceptable method of conducting an AGM according to our constitution and OSCR (the Office of Scottish Charities Regulator).

We have until February to conduct the AGM, but we are hoping to organise this before the end of the year. We will be sending out a short email to all members and associate members at least 14 days before the AGM date with the agenda, alerting you to watch out for the actual AGM email and to renew your membership.

The actual AGM email will contain all the agenda items: minutes of last year's AGM, the Trustees report, the financial report, and the election of the Trustees. There will be a proxy voting form and we need you to respond by email (or post) with your votes.

If you are not a member, and would like to become one and receive these emails, or if you are interested in becoming a Trustee or volunteer, please contact us by emailing us -

enquiries@romhc.org.uk

Stories from Uisken

This island is full of stories: romantic, ridiculous, sad, scary, sometimes seamy: true accounts of events which are part of local history and also tall tales. We have a wealth of stories to explore and share.

The Trustees of the Historical Centre were caught up in a search for one: the true story of **Catherine MacKinnon**, a woman from Uisken, who at the beginning of the 19th Century crossed continents to become governess in the Imperial Palace in St Petersburg and nurse to the future Tsar, Alexander II. It's said that at her funeral in St Petersburg in 1859, the Tsar sang a Gaelic lullaby which he learned in her care.

A version of the full story can be found here:

<https://www.thefreelibrary.com/Silence+fell+at+the+graveside+as+the+Tsar+sang+a+Gaelic+lulla+by+to...-a060221766>

There's also a moving poem 'Song for a Tsar' by Donald S Murray, which was recently printed in 'Northwords Now':

<https://www.northwordsnow.co.uk/issue34/Song-for-a-Tsar>

A few years ago, this poignant tale was told on several occasions by Iain Campbell of Tobermory, to folk on coach tours across Mull. As they passed Uisken road end, there wasn't a dry eye on the bus! We haven't yet come across any examples of folk from the Ross telling it. So if you remember hearing it, please let us know (enquiries@romhc.org.uk).

That's what the Centre is for: to keep the stories of the Ross of Mull alive. We do it by collecting and preserving artefacts and photographs. We have an archives cupboard full of Census and other records, documents which give a detailed picture of the daily lives of ordinary people, the priorities of the landowners, and what happened during the Clearances when so many were evicted and emigrated. We try to share these as widely as possible, for instance in our very popular series of seven Walking Guides: **Discover the Ross**, which pack between their pages, routes, natural history notes, local history and legends.

When these booklets were being compiled, a great deal of walking went on, to check out the routes, but also a great deal of ceilidhing – visiting and listening to folk telling stories of the places they knew well. The team who worked on the books had the privilege of hearing these stories first-hand.

Something similar happened more recently when the **Remembering the Ross** group met at the Centre at Millbrae or round the fire at Creich. Common household objects handed round were linked to memories, and when folk listen to each other, there can be a chain-reaction of storytelling. Alas, at the moment, Covid-19 restrictions mean that we can't bring such a group together.

Many will remember Attie MacKechnie (1924-2005) who was a seannachie, holding in his head the traditional tales of the Ross and accounts of its history. He's remembered for many things: his involvement in the rebuilding of the Abbey in Iona; singing in Gaelic in local ceilidhs over the years; his collaboration with James McKeand in founding the Historical Centre.

His recorded voice, among others from Mull, can be found in **Tobar an Dualchais – Kist o Riches** – at the School of Scottish Studies in Edinburgh. He cherished the stories in the stones (the quarries, the standing stones, the Galloway dykes) of the landscape which we share.

But he was just one of many storytellers. And the tradition continues. So, while we were trying to find out more about Catherine MacKinnon of Uisken, a variety of anecdotes, memories and legends associated with that place came into the conversation.

Here's one told, originally in Gaelic, by Donald MacFarlane, in 1968:

The Granny and the whale

It was the end of the eighteenth century. The boat was on its way to America and she was full of everything that was best. When she was coming near the islands, a big whale came up by her side and put the fear of life on those on board.

Despite the shouting of the crew they couldn't make her flee. All day she followed them with a big open mouth. One man threw a three-legged stool at her but she swallowed that. Another man threw a barrel of apples and she swallowed that. At last, one of the sailors thought that nothing would be useful unless the whale could get someone in her belly. Before long, an old woman that was on board was overboard and the whale swallowed her. They disappeared, and the boat got into a safe harbour.



The next day the whale was found stranded on the sand at Uisken in the Ross of Mull. There was confusion yonder – every man with a knife was cutting and skinning but they were scarce believing their eyes when they saw the old woman inside sitting on a stool and she busy eating an apple!

This next was heard by Anne Baxter being told by Alexander Cameron of Assapol Farm in the 1970s (though she thinks that Ronnie Campbell, retelling it, added the tablecloth).

The 'last look back'

When people in Uisken, Ardchiavaig or Ardalanish died, they were usually buried in the graveyard at Kilvickeon. Men of the area would all help to carry the coffin overland, taking it in turns to lay the coffin on the ground, take a rest, and continue. The cairn on top of the hill above Uisken is known as the 'last look back', where the cortege stopped so that there was a last look back at their home, for the deceased.



As it is a tough and wearisome task to carry perhaps your relation or neighbour over rough and hilly ground, the party were supplied with nourishment. Now in these days, times were hard, but the carrying party were honoured, so food and drink were supplied. There was a tablecloth to drape over the coffin, and whisky to drink.

Whisky was scarce then, and it came in a stoneware bottle.

On this occasion, perhaps the deceased was heavy, but there were many stops for rest and refreshment, and the party grew quite cheery in the circumstances. However, as they reached the walls of Kilvickeon, they realised that there was something not quite right, as the coffin still lay on the hill behind them.

And here Effie Cruden and Euphie Wood enjoy sharing memories of school:

The bomb in the sea

Teachers can make all the difference between a bad experience of school, and a good one. As children living on the Ross today were going back to school after several months' absence, conversation turned to memories of Bunessan School 70 years ago, when Mr MacDonald was headmaster: "He didn't stand for any nonsense, but he respected his pupils" said Effie, and Euphie, who added that "he had the Gaelic" agreed also that "He was strict but fair – a kind man".



Earlier, before the school car brought pupils in from far-flung crofts, there was the tiny side-school at Uisken (at one point there were 29 pupils plus teacher). Miss MacInnes was in charge. She was kind, too. The children respected her and (almost always) did as they were told. When she let them out at break-time to play in the fresh-air, she would show great interest in any finds they brought back from field or shore. So there was a day, toward the end of the war, when the girls came running in and she asked, "Well did you find any wild flowers?" and they said "No, but the boys saw a bomb floating in the sea." And what did the boys do? "Well, they're all throwing stones at it."

The explosion that followed wasn't the mine, but the teacher!

Fortunately, those children survived – and so does the tradition of storytelling on the Ross.

Based on an article originally written for 'Round & About' by Anne Baxter and Jan Sutch Pickard

Since then, Kirsty Lord, part-time Administrator at the Centre, has shared this story, told by her bother Allan Cameron at the funeral of their mother, Flora Cameron, who was the Miss MacInnes who taught Effie long ago:

Children from a black-house

Flora MacInnes did well in school and decided to go to teachers' training college in Glasgow. Once qualified, she was able to teach in English and Gaelic. Her first teaching post was, would you believe, back on Mull, at Uisken, where in time her brother and his family, and now her son Gregor have lived. At the time the school was a 10ft by 10ft tin shed!

We have been told she was in lodgings with a local family during this period, and only got home at weekends when her father came round the coast in his boat from Carsaig to collect her (weather depending).

She told the story of an early learning experience – for herself – at Uisken.

Two children from the Campbell family, probably Hector and Ronnie, the youngest, repeatedly brought in homework in which was filthy black and almost illegible. Her response of giving punishment homework having failed miserably, she then resorted to what was the common ultimate deterrent ... THE DREADED TAWSE!

Same result!

With no other option she elected to visit the home and enlist the parents help with her predicament. On arrival she was invited in, and the table set for tea (best china). It was at this point that the penny dropped. As well as all the tiny particles of soot from the thatched roof spreading all over the crockery, soot from the oil lamps and open fire was covering all and sundry!

Flora/Miss MacInnes realised the deep injustice of her punishment of the children for something out-with their control. She couldn't forgive herself. It was a lesson she never forgot.

WANTED!

... as soon as possible ... a couple of volunteers in the same household or 'bubble', to help us complete the survey and documentation of Kilvickeon churchyard.

We already have on file photographs, notes and maps from earlier stages of the survey. These are in the Historical Centre, so time would need to be dedicated to going through these, collating them, possibly creating a simple database and noting work still to be done.

This would be indoor work in a controlled environment – booking sole use of the building and observing hygiene rules.

Following this there would be fieldwork at the site three miles from the Centre. Because of its isolation it would be preferable to work in a pair there. Bicycles or a vehicle suitable to sections of rough track would be an advantage.

New information would then need to be added to the resource in the Centre. From this work we aim to produce a graveyard pamphlet on a similar template to those on Kilpatrick, Suie and Fionnphort.

We have been hoping for some time to complete this interesting piece of work. Lichen and weathering are making the inscriptions harder to read each year, and in the summer bracken, brambles and long grass are a problem. So this is an ideal project for this winter, for people who enjoy problem solving and take a systematic approach. Plenty of fresh air guaranteed!

Please get in touch if you are interested (enquiries@romhc.org.uk)