**RoMHC Trustees Annual Report 2023-24**

A reminder of why we exist:

‘The Ross of Mull Historical Centre (RoMHC) is a Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisation (SCIO) whose purposes are to promote the advancement of heritage, science and education by the study, display and promotion of the cultural history and natural environment of the operating area.’

That sounds rather dry, but unpacking these ‘purposes’ shows the diversity of what we are doing and what we hope to do. For instance, the last-mentioned, our **‘Natural environment’** becomes even more relevant because Emily, the National Trust for Scotland’s Ranger (from whom we’ll hear more at the AGM), has her office in this building and uses its grounds for sessions with the after-school Nature Club and holiday events focusing on plants in the wildlife garden, birds, moths and beetles. What’s more, since the pandemic the Community Garden has taken root and is flourishing. Judy Gibson, a Trustee who is also on the Community Garden committee, takes up the story:

***Ross of Mull Community Garden***

*This beautiful space right in the grounds of the Historical Centre continues to thrive and benefit a huge range of the local community as well as visitors to the Centre.*

*The garden is managed under the umbrella of South West Mull and Iona Development (SWMID) and grants have been sourced to pay for a part time gardener (Lorraine) year round. Lorraine has a wealth of gardening skills and is full of enthusiasm for ways to encourage more people to benefit from the garden. She works with the local primary school so that pupils come on a regular basis to the garden, helping to plant and sow crops in the spring, harvest in the late summer and clear and tidy beds in the late autumn. The harvest this year was especially rewarding- seeing the children eagerly digging for onions and potatoes, picking tomatoes, squash and beans in the poly-tunnel, chopping up all the vegetables to make soup, and grinding garlic and nuts to make pesto. They then shared the soup and pasta with parents and other community members in a harvest lunch.*

*A few days later Lorraine organised a harvest sharing for the community with people bringing any surplus fruit, vegetables etc they might have from their gardens to share with others. This is a regular annual event and is always popular and well attended. Early in the year we had our annual seed swap and then in spring plant swap.*

 *Another successful event this summer was Practical Plants Day. This was organised by Emily the Ranger in conjunction with Lorraine and garden volunteers. Workshops on Willow weaving, Eco-printing, and foraging were offered to adults with free drop-in children’s activities available alongside.*

*Lorraine is present at the garden two mornings a week and always encourages community members to drop by either to help with the work she is doing or just for a chat and cuppa. There are also a number of raised beds that are offered as “allotment beds” to local residents. Emily the ranger uses the garden and centre facilities as a base for the after school nature club which she runs during term time.*

*The garden is always open so please drop by and see what is growing next time you visit the Historical Centre.*

The amazing geology of Mull is the focus as John Faithfull hosts occasional **‘Stone chat’** sessions in the Centre identifying pebbles picked up by visitors and local folk of all ages.

Among our purposes, the **natural environment** is linked with our **cultural history.** The Ross has been a place where storytelling and poetry have long flourished, alongside music on the pipes, fiddle and accordion. Local stories and songs in Gaelic are preserved in the ‘Tobar an Dualchais, Kist o’Riches’ from the collections of the School of Scottish Studies. These include the voice of Attie MacKechnie, a *seannachie* as well as a craftsman, who was one of the founders of the Centre. At Bunessan Show in 2023 we celebrated ‘Local heroes’ including Calum Macpherson, a gifted piper as well as a carpenter who (like Attie) played a key part in the rebuilding of the Abbey complex in Iona. Mary Macdonald was a prolific local poet, evicted with her family from Shiaba, later living in Ardtun. Her name is widely known from the hymn *Leanabh an Aigh* (set to the traditional tune now called Bunessan) and in 2024 the Centre was glad to support local fundraising to renovate and repoint her monument. Last winter and again this, we have revived the sessions of **Remembering the Ross**, gathering older members of the Community round the fire at Creich Hall to share stories about events and traditions within living memory. The Centre is delighted to support Feis Muile by providing workshop rooms for the young musicians.

**Study** is another of our purposes. In their own time, some of the Trustees are taking Gaelic classes, and our small library has a growing collection of Gaelic books. We have an ambition, as we reprint our signage, to have it in Gaelic, as well as English, wherever possible. Mention of our library is a reminder that the late Dr. Stewart Cameron, as well as leaving a generous bequest and extra copies of his **History of the Ross of Mull** to sell, left many books of local and Scottish history from his library. We need to find space to make these accessible for study. This year we have also become aware of the scholarship and local knowledge which underlie Willie Orr’s **Shiaba** novels, which we are currently selling (including signed copies!). Year round, some of the Trustees try to meet requests – in person or by email – for genealogy research and local history information. To enable this, we hope to continue the reorganisation of our archives and cataloguing. However, our small group of Trustees and Volunteers are challenged to find the time and mobility needed – and it would be good not just to develop relevant skills, but to add to our numbers. We do continue to study and learn, so are glad to report that right at the beginning of the 2025 season we will be hosting a talk by Alasdair Whyte on the Mull Place Names project.

**Display:** one of our stated purposes is to display our many resources. For instance, we already have a fascinating map which Jane Brunton prepared with place-names connected to plants and trees, but it is currently displayed in one corner of the office, on a crowded wall. A gift of detailed maps of Peggy MacInnes’s croft at Uisken and of Bunessan, deserve further study, but they are so large that we have been challenged to make them available. Similarly, the large informative poster produced by Tom Aitchison about ‘The Drowning of the Harvesters’ – young migrant labourers from the Ross and Iona, whose sailing boat was run down in the Clyde in 1822 – has had to be hung in a doorway (though it still catches the attention of visitors). Displays need space, as books need shelves. It’s salutary to visit Iona’s Heritage Centre, which has much more space, and different resources. In contrast, we have to keep interesting things in a locked cupboard, wishing they could be out in the open for visitors to browse

**Promotion:** We are constantly challenged to promote our very existence (visitor footfall this year was down – following the trend in Mull as a whole). We do our best with leaflets, small posters, the banner on the fence as traffic enters the village, ‘feather’ flags, word of mouth. We also have our well used web site and frequent use of social media. It’s not just the Centre that we are promoting, but the uniqueness of the Ross. Last year Alastair Satchel’s video of **A Creel of Stories** did just that – and could be viewed all over Mull and beyond. This year the visiting Story Bus from An Tobar recorded the story of Calum MacPherson’s kilt suit, found in an attic in Bunessan. If folk don’t come to us, we need to go to where they are: for instance Creich Hall for talks and Remember the Ross, Bunessan Hall for book-signing and ceilidhs. And every year we have a presence at Bunessan Show – come shine, come rain!

**Science and education:** These, mentioned among our purposes, underly many of the activities mentioned already. Here’s one example:

**Bunessan Mill** Right now, we need to educate ourselves about the science of milling grain, the role of the estate-owned mill on this site, the structure of a historic building, and how to stabilise it. We also need to learn how to raise eye-watering amounts of money for the essential task of saving it from being demolished – and then maybe to repurpose it as a local resource.

A separate item on the Agenda describes the survey already undertaken in relation to stabilising the structure, and the equally professional – just completed – Community Consultation about its possible future use. Copies are available. We need to give an account of the outlay on both of these, which includes a generous donation to enable such surveys, but hope it has been money well spent.

At this point it’s clear that we ( Members, Volunteers and Trustees) are engaged in something which isn’t just about the study of the past, or the challenges of the present, but also about stewardship of a future resource for curious visitors to the Ross and for the whole community – the last key word: **Heritage.**

**JSP 7.11.24**