

DORNOCH HERITAGE SOCIETY

August 2004

It is with great regret that we acknowledge the passing of Jimmy Bell, founder and primus motor of the Society. An appreciation of him as colleague and friend by Struan Robertson is printed below.

AGM

The Society is holding its AGM on Thursday **September 2 at 7.30 pm** in the Council Chamber of the Carnegie Building, Dornoch.

The present committee of the Society is:

Joint chairpersons: *Jimmy Melville & Sylvia Park*

Treasurer: *Robbie Banks*

Secretary: *Robin Ashby*

Membership Secretary: *Ullabritt Ashby*

Members: *Ken Bromage, Rena Oman, Ian Ross-Harper*

Regretfully Robbie Banks has tendered her resignation as of the next AGM and Sylvia Park wishes to stand down as Chairperson. We thank them both wholeheartedly for all they have done over the past years.

This situation leaves four vacancies on the committee and new members are welcome. Some members have expressed a possible interest in standing, but further nominations to Jimmy, Sylvia or Robin would be appreciated.

EXCURSIONS

Castle Leod

The proposed private viewing was considered too expensive by the committee and has therefore been cancelled. Public viewings of the castle are available for £5 a head on September 1 to 5 between 2 pm and 5.30 pm.

The committee will consider an alternative arrangement during the autumn.

Highland Archaeology Week

Historylinks has organised 'A walk in Skelbo woods' looking at pre-historic and historic remains. Led by **Anne Coombs** who works for Historic Scotland, the event takes place on **Sunday 10th Oct**. Meet at the Skelbo Woods Forest Enterprise car park at 2pm.

Stout walking shoes and wet weather clothing are advised. Suitable for all ages. Not suitable for wheel chairs. There is no charge.

COMPLETED PROJECTS

RAILWAY FILM

The film was premiered on May 15 with many of the participants attending. It combines filmed interviews with our archive material and includes some footage from "Proud Sutherland" which has now been restored and returned to the Society. Both the railway film and "Proud Sutherland" are shown at Historylinks. "Proud Sutherland" can be purchased.

HISTORYLINKS TRAIL

The Trail was opened on August 11 by Lord Strathnaver. This has been a major project that has

taken 3 years and £32,000 to complete. Funding has been provided by Heritage Lottery, CASE, Highland Council and many local sponsors whom Historylinks Museum and Dornoch Focus Group thank very much.

The Trail is not just a set of new signs at 16 interesting sites. There is an audio guide facility in English, French, German and Spanish as well as school packs for primary and secondary levels. Pick up a leaflet from Historylinks and experience the Trail yourself!

FUND-RAISING

As usual, our traditional activities have both drawn attention to the Society and raised satisfactory funds. We held our Spring Coffee Morning and had a stall at both the Wemyss Fair and the Sutherland County Show.

Our summer "series" of well-attended lectures were given this year by Cllr Duncan Allan on small town development, Rob Gibson MSP on droving and Tibbie Fenelon on her trek through the Yangtze Gorge.

MEMBERSHIP

Paid-up members of the Society are invited to attend lectures free of charge. Free admission to Historylinks is also included in membership. Non-members will be required to pay for both activities. Please have your membership-card with you when attending lectures.

NB Those members who have already signed a Standing Order for membership fees will receive their membership card for 2004/2005 with this newsletter. All other members will find a reminder enclosed if they have not paid by other means.



The Historylinks Museum Trust wishes to thank all those who have contributed to the Historylinks Trail and hopes both members and visitors will enjoy the experiences it offers.

There is an exciting new display of a Highland Volunteer. William Bethune was born in 1858 at Bonar Bridge. He worked as a river pilot in the Dornoch Firth and enlisted in the Sutherland Volunteers in 1881.

The museum now has a part-time assistant curator, Peter Wild, so that it can remain open longer. Denise Ferne is again working during the summer season as supervisor. Volunteers to man the counter are always welcome even during the darker half of the year.

The museum is open every day between 10 and 4 until September 26th. From 27th Sept - 15th Oct it is open Monday - Friday and then until Easter 2005 most Wednesdays and Thursdays.

COMING EVENTS

2004

September 2	AGM for Dornoch Heritage Society	COUNCIL CHAMBER
October 9 - 17	Highland Archaeology Week	
October 14	Father Mel Langille	<i>Ties between Nova Scotia and Sutherland</i> COUNCIL CHAMBER

All further meetings in ROYAL GOLF HOTEL

November 11	Margaret Thomson	<i>'Buried Treasure'</i>
November 13	Coffee Morning	
December 9	Jimmy Melville	<i>The Dornoch I Knew</i>

2005

January 22	Burns Celebration	
February 19	Helen Fairgrieve	<i>Letters from Canada and Rosehall</i>
March 18	Donald Goskirk	<i>Fiddle Music in the Highlands</i>
April	Annual Lunch	Date and venue to be announced

STOP PRESS The lecture on October 14 will be in the Council Chamber, not at Royal Golf Hotel as stated on membership card.

THE LATE JAMES K. BELL – founder and honorary president of Dornoch Heritage Society

Recollections by Struan Robertson.

One day, shortly after our arrival in Dornoch, into my life walked Jimmy Bell, who took me away for a car-run up the lower Evelix Valley. This was to be the start of many repeated forays into the hinterland of Dornoch to visit ancient monuments, to measure them out, to photograph anything of interest and to discuss the amazing flora and fauna, of both woods and moorland. Of course, upon return home to a cup of coffee and a soak in a warm bath, while memories were fresh in the mind, I committed our findings to paper, in drawing form. Here I was almighty grateful that I had attended the after-school lessons in technical drawing, in Glasgow, which had kept me beyond the time of the normal train, which threw teatime and homework out of the timetable, and eventually a much later time to bed, all of which decided my parents that this drawing class had to cease! A great sadness: it was a discipline I learned to enjoy, and which now came in extremely useful in rendering drawing after drawing to Jimmy for his Heritage Society collection.

Jimmy was at once the kindest and most interesting of companions. His profound and widespread knowledge of Nature, flora, birds, archaeology and geology, as well as a tract's history and its rural industrial significance gave our rambles a wealth of happy learning and understanding. His love for the countryside and its beauty in all weathers relit the joys of the Lanarkshire woods, fields, farms and moors of my youth. And what a bonus! Jimmy was a Lanarkshire man like myself, so we had a lot in common. And what sharings of memories and experiences of Scotland's most industrial, yet beautiful, county were kindled. Jimmy knew all the most interesting places to visit. First of all, the old family croft of Achosnich on the north bank of the Evelix and the terribly lonely Strath Ach A Vaich homestead far up the valley of that name. Then further afield there was not a hut circle, shieling, standing stone, croft or enclosure that we did not view, photograph, measure up and draw, insofar as I am aware.

We discussed everything and anything: why the upper and lower Evelix Valley settlements are two totally unconnected areas with separate populations with but one old, disused track traversing the narrow, boggy, glacial valley of the Evelix from the lower end of Loch an Lagain to Achormlarie. We walked the length of the new Forestry road from Achormlarie to loch Buidhe with its glorious evening view through sunlit hills to the far west of the county. We saw ancient pine forest tree stumps and roots hard as stone in sections of the road through peat banks. We saw divers on Loch Beinn Dombhnaill and a moorland owl, in the daylight, quartering the heather in search of prey. We discovered at Puill Fhraoch settlement on the old track to Loch Laro a wonderfully preserved corn-drying kiln, with two entrance doors and a kiln with two stokeholes, all intact. We reported it to the late Mrs Durham of Scottish Heritage who, in turn, reported it to her Department Boss as of her own finding! Jimmy would not have liked my mentioning this, but the pre-history sciences, the world over, are sadly rife of such petty irritations as the theft of findings and discoveries.

Then, nearer to home, the amazing colony of hut circles and enclosures in the area of Camore Woods, more than 30 of them, described in the Royal Commission on Ancient and Historic Monuments and Constructions of Sutherland of 1911 (Price six shillings!). To these we added one or two more not previously discovered. All of these we measured, photographed and drew for Jimmy's collection for the Dornoch Heritage Society that he conceived, floated and carried to Honorary Presidency.

All the time we would be discussing what we saw and what we thought of it, who might have lived there, the families long gone overseas. Sutherland's grand- and great-grandchildren visited Dornoch and wanted to know more about their forebears and the crofts they had worked. Rarely indeed did they ever leave Jimmy's house without the details they sought!

Then one wonderful day, Jimmy was given a whole day's use of the civil engineering team who built the Mound road bridge to professionally survey any of the historic areas that he had felt of most importance! He chose the Cnoc Gargh-Airigh settlement near Loch Laro, north of Bonar Bridge, and a whole day was spent up in the hills near this source of the River Evelix. Using all modern laser surveying equipment the resultant drawing was exact to within a fraction of a millimetre. When it was finally turned out, great was

our pleasure in this, for it showed that our own foot-slogging, hill-scrabbling, peat-bog-sloshing elementary and untutored survey was not so far short of the professional job for accuracy! A wonderful thrill for us both and a real uplift in confidence in the empirical techniques we had evolved to do so! Then there was the building of the Dornoch Firth road bridge 1989-91, the first big "cast-push, incremental launched" bridge in Britain: Christiani & Nielsen of Holland and Morrison Construction of Tain's successful joint venture into what had been for over a century considered quite impossible. Jimmy Bell immediately got in contact through Mr Ted Murdoch of Messrs Crouch & Hogg, resident engineers, and secured permits for Dornoch Heritage Society to visit and inspect the works. This was used several times, inspecting the construction "factory" on the Ross-shire side and the hydraulic rams that pushed the "increments" of construction, week by week, across the tops of the pre-constructed pillars towards the north shore. Trips were even made in the construction motor launches and tugs out to see the building of these pillars and the construction platforms, all of which was a marvellously interesting experience. The bridge was opened by Her Majesty the Queen Mother on Tuesday 27th August 1991. It is 900 metres long a deck level and estimated to weigh some 16,000 tons.

Jimmy then managed to arrange a visit by the Area Archaeologist from Inverness to have a look at some of the Camore Wood's bigger hut circles and the enigmatic Jarl Sigurd's so-called "grave" on the Sydera field just west of Sydera Woods. The site is thought possibly to have been the Jarl's grave from descriptions in the Orkeyinga Saga. The Area Archaeologist was, of course, interested, but entirely negative in almost all comment!

Annual displays of the Society's work, usually in the Council Chamber, caused quite a lot of local and tourist interest- sufficient indeed to generate thoughts about premises for permanent display: in other words, a Dornoch Museum. My daughter, Anthea, was instrumental in securing several professional display units at a much-reduced price, due to some trivial transport damage. They were a very great help. Slowly these happy and thoroughly enjoyable excursions into the countryside began to become less and less often, and shorter and shorter as Jimmy began to suffer the indignity of advancing age. Recurrent trouble with his eyes dimmed his vision to just short of blindness and his vibrant and vital general health deteriorated. The almost nightly visits to my home to chat and examine drawings under production thinned out and finally stopped as he became weak with visits to Raigmore commanding more of his time. He bore these increasing constraints with amazing fortitude, even until he slipped away, a very brave and uncomplaining man.

Jimmy had thus become my closest friend in the North and we had tremendous rapport one with another. I remember only one difference of opinions in our twenty years of friendship, actually over the Dornoch Heritage Society Collection Cataloguing, and I was so sorry over that. However, as an extremely happy result, it was accepted by both younger and more experienced members.

Jimmy was a gracious gentleman; kindly to a degree, tolerant, deeply interested, a wonderfully widely read person and a great teacher. He always had time to listen to any problem or project and to give of the soundest advice. His great interest in poetry was the basis of many a friendship and to listen to his wide memory of verse and to watch the sparkle in his eyes as he quoted was very pleasant and fraught with admiration at his tremendous memory. To have conceived the idea of a Dornoch Heritage Society, to have gathered the interest of so great a number of members and to have carried the young Society from strength to strength is perhaps the best memorial to a man of his calibre. The very first meeting was in the West Church Hall when, I understand, the new members were all asked to bring an antique for display and discussion of merit! Jimmy walked into my life at a most needed time, as I retired to Dornoch with absolutely nothing in my mind to do. He filled my emptiness of being with the most marvellous vistas of countryside, pre-history and modern history, of people past and present, of Nature and modern progress and with the urge to record at least some of it in a manner I never thought possible of myself. He was a wonderful friend.