

MAY 2020 NEWSLETTER

CORONAVIRUS COMES TO DORNOCH

On behalf of everyone associated with Historylinks Museum and Dornoch Heritage Society I sincerely hope that this newsletter finds you in good health and that you, your friends and your families are all safe and well in these extraordinary times.

At the time of writing we are entering the 8th week of lock down; the Museum did not open for the season on the 1st April as we had planned and Dornoch remains ghostly quiet with deserted streets and unprecedented scenes of people forming orderly queues to enter our shops.

Obviously, the Museum will remain closed until such time as Scottish Government and Museums Galleries Scotland indicate that it is safe to re-open.

However, we were fortunate to welcome over 70 visitors to the Museum during Fibre Fest in early March to see the magnificent dress we have on loan (see inside for more details).



Furthermore, although the doors may be closed there has been an huge amount of activity going on behind the scenes and although Caroline (our Museum Assistant) is now on furlough leave, Lynne (our Curator) continues to do valuable work for us, either from home or on her own at the Museum.

Before the reality of the Covid-19 pandemic hit home we had made great strides in refreshing the Museum in readiness for opening, with numerous new items on display and a fantastic temporary exhibition being finished off.

Alas, these will have to wait for another day!

Meantime, we have turned our attention to using more digital technology to try and make our collection more accessible to members and visitors alike via the Internet.

If you have access to the web I would strongly recommend that you visit our website (link below), our Image Library and our Facebook page where we are continually adding new material to try and keep people both informed and entertained.

Also, working with our Young Curators we are encouraging people to keep diaries of their time during lock down to act as a permanent record of these strange times, and as you can see Peter Wild is busy recording events with his camera which we will be adding to our archives in due course.





WORKING FROM HOME

Over the first few weeks of lock down both Caroline and Lynne were working from home. Even though the Museum couldn't open there was still lots to do and initially they were both finishing off work and research related to the Heritage Lottery funded Longhouse Project (see below).

Caroline has just completed a fascinating book about the Longhouse Project that encapsulates the research, workshops, history and outcomes of this brilliant project. As leader of the Young Curators Club, she has also been keeping in touch with the YCs and encouraging them in heritage projects they can do from home. Unfortunately this work has now come to an end and Caroline has accepted the offer to take government supported furlough leave, **but we look forward to her returning to the Museum as soon as we can re-open.**

Lynne has been working on a new display for WW1 and WW2 - fortunately research is something that can be done from home! She has also been keeping our Facebook page refreshed, is keeping in touch with our band of volunteers and amongst a host of other jobs has been working on resubmitting a funding application to Museums Galleries Scotland for a new cabinet to house the Katherine Gray dress.

Lynne has now returned to work on her own at the Museum but both she and Caroline are looking forward to the day we can reopen and welcome our members and visitors back to the Museum.

SUTHERLAND LONGHOUSE PROJECT UPDATE

Launched with the publication of a programme of events in November 2019, the Sutherland Longhouse Project soon gained momentum in the New Year with folk from the local area, many hitherto unconnected with the Museum, booking to take part in a wide range of events.

Focusing on life in the pre-Clearance settlement of Dalnamain (6 miles north west of Dornoch) the events offered something for everyone and thanks to Lottery funding they were all free for participants. Despite decidedly poor weather for some events (the first site survey and the willow weaving spring to mind!) feedback has been very positive with 'more of the same' being a regular comment on feedback forms.

Many of you will have seen the blogs posted on Facebook after each event. It was therefore extremely disappointing and highly frustrating when we had to postpone the last two events due to the catastrophe that has affected all our lives so deeply - the arrival of Covid-19!

The important thing to remember, though, is that this is a postponement and NOT a cancellation.

Thanks to the Heritage Lottery Fund (and to Lynne, who was largely instrumental in securing it) we now have a six-month extension period and so are able to look forward to rescheduling both the last workshops and the final event - the Project Conference - by the end of October (fingers crossed!).

Many people had been involved in making the Conference a special event: Dr Michael Rhodes (our guest speaker), Ashley Rose (for drone footage of the site), Dave Mahoney (who with the Young Curators had been creating a site model for the Museum exhibition), a group of musicians from Dornoch Academy (who with their workshop leader Gordon Gunn are to perform a piece of music composed for and dedicated to Dalnamain), Lynne (who has spent time researching for her own talk about life at Dalnamain), a valiant band of Historylinks volunteers helping organise the event and last, but certainly not least, Peter Wild (who has given up hours of his time to create a photographic record of the project).



However, the show must (and will) go on! Since lockdown, we have prepared display panels for the temporary exhibition at the Museum along with some of the objects created at the workshops, including a willow hurdle, silver and wooden spoons, a replica of a drover's blue bonnet, and a leather belt pouch. The Project Booklet has just been completed by Caroline (with a fascinating contribution from Lynne) and will be available around re-launch time.

With all this, we hope we will be able to rekindle interest and momentum and make our final event - when it eventually comes - one to remember!

MUSEUM UPGRADES

The Museum underwent yet another transformation over the winter.

Outside, in early March (just before lock down), Peter & Jerry managed to complete a new shed to house a number of large domestic artefacts which hitherto we have been unable to exhibit. The centre-piece of the new display is a large washing mangle previously used for the laundry at Skibo Castle.

Another new large exhibit is a wheeled fire pump formerly used at the airfield in Dornoch which was discovered in a Highland Council shed in Brora by Brian Fraser, to whom we are most grateful. However, with all the confusion surrounding the pandemic we have yet to decide where this will be displayed.

The final external upgrades were the addition of a new interpretation panel for the popular Fishy Tales labyrinth and the removal of the moss from the slates on the Museum roof.

The Museum is looking superb in readiness for opening



Inside the Museum we were looking forward to exhibiting a new 'star attraction' in the form of a 300 year old dress which arrived on loan to us just in time to go on temporary display for Fibre Fest on March 10th.

This 'bizarre' design silk brocade mantua was first worn by Katherine Gray (nee Fraser, of Overskibo) and has been passed down through her family to its current owner, Barbara Francis, who is a direct descendent. The owner's family emigrated to Australia when she was a child and she was gifted the dress on her sixteenth birthday by her Scottish Godmother.

The term 'bizarre' was first used in 1953 by Dr. Vilhelm Sloman to describe silk weaver James Leman's 18th century designs. The patterns were inspired by fabrics imported from India and a book of Leman's early designs dedicated to his father can be seen in the V & A Museum in London.

The silk of Katherine's dress is an important example of Spitalfields silk and is as bright and fresh as it was when it was woven. It is now safely stored in our archive room but, with the owner's consent we hope to put it on display as soon as we are able to reopen.



Katherine Gray dress prior to being exhibited

A video showing the intricate patterns of the dress is now available on the Historylinks website.

Elsewhere in the Museum the railway section has been revamped with the addition of newly restored Salter scales that were used at Dornoch railway station.

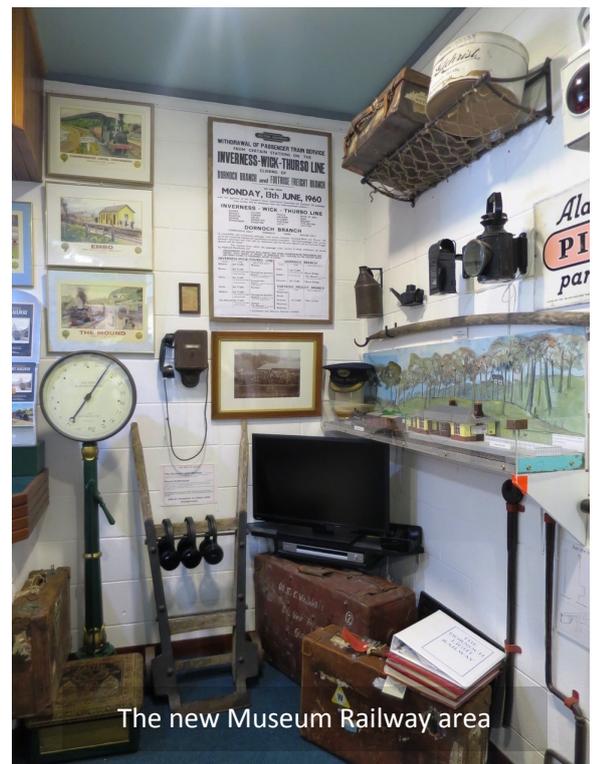
The new luggage rack is a prop but the hat box and leather luggage covered in labels are the real thing. Notice also the station phone, ring codes and the station master's hat.

When the Museum reopens we hope to be offering a range of videos for visitors to watch. This includes the '*Links Through the History of Dornoch*' film which was shot on video tape in 1999. Over the winter Peter Wild has completely remade this film with all new digital footage. The film retains the iconic voice over by actress Hannah Gordon but now includes dramatic new drone footage of Dornoch and other scenes from the local area.

Other new artefacts to go on display include a **Bronze Age Beaker** on loan from Sutherland Estates at Dunrobin Castle and a beautiful prehistoric **Deer Antler tool** which was found on Embo beach by Kate Gilchrist, one of our volunteers.

Finally, on Halloween last year our Young Curators Club members embarked on a spooky walk through Dornoch complete with masks that they had made for the occasion.

Those of a stout heart will be able to view the masks in the Museum when we reopen!



The new Museum Railway area

EXTENSION PROJECT UPDATE

In January the Trustees made an offer to purchase the Museum site from the Dornoch Common Good Fund (DCGF). Had our offer been accepted it would have unlocked additional funding from the Scottish Land Fund, but unfortunately the Sutherland County Committee of the Highland Council decided that a sale was not in the best interests of the Common Good Fund and so our offer was rejected.

However, our lease of £10 per annum is in place until 2095 and in April the Trustees made an application to DCGF for a grant of £27k to part-fund Phase 2 of the extension project, covering the detailed design work, planning & building warrant consent and preparation of tender documents.

This application was supported by the Dornoch Area Community Council at their meeting of 15th April and we await ratification by the relevant Highland Council Committee when they reconvene after the current suspension of meetings. Once the grant has been finalised we will be able to appoint an Architect led design team to move the project to 'shovel-ready' stage. At this point we will have a clear idea of the final costs and will re-engage with major funders to try and get all build and fitting-out finance in place.

YOUNG CURATORS CLUB UPDATE *by Caroline Seymour*

Wednesday after-school meetings for the Young Curators stopped abruptly with the lock down and for a time, the Club was suspended.

However, I have been in touch with the members through their parents to suggest that we might use our time to work on a couple of projects: researching our families and keeping a record of life in lockdown. I was concerned that we should not lose the sense of group identity and the enthusiasm that we had built up over the year since the Club's inception, and also to keep the children aware of the importance of our heritage for us and for future generations.

The fact that families have been thrown into prolonged close proximity by school and other closures seems to present an ideal opportunity for the first activity, while the current crisis through which they are living would seem to provide a prime, if unwished for, opportunity to create a unique first-hand record for the future. It is early days yet, but I hope there is the enthusiasm to run with one, or the other – or both.

Looking to a brighter future, when Historylinks reopens, YCC members will hopefully be able to play their part in helping Dave Mahoney complete the site model of Dalnamain for the Project exhibition. There will also be a new display in the Children's Room of the Hallowe'en masks they made last year, representing characters from Dornoch's past, with a short explanation by each child.

Finally, we hope to make more use of the masks at a new Hallowe'en event for the community – again, all being well! And there is no shortage of ideas for new projects when we are back to business as usual: a look at Embo's rich heritage, and perhaps even a new venture for our time-travelling reporters!



FINANCE & FUNDING

When the affects of Covid-19 became clear the Trustees quickly approved a budget for 2020 based on a worst-case scenario of the Museum being closed all year. The outcome was a deficit of £10k for the financial year, to be covered from our existing reserves.

Since adopting the budget we have managed to secure a £10k Business Support Grant from the Government. This grant, along with income from the furlough scheme means that we should now be able to get through to 2021 with a minimal reduction in our reserves. This comparatively rosy position is a result of the careful management of previous office bearers (in particular our Treasurer, Tony Rundle) and the ongoing support from you, our members.

Another piece of good news is that we have recently received a £2k award from the Museums Galleries Scotland 'Digital Resilience COVID-19 Fund' to upgrade our [Image Library](#) program. This will help John Barnes and others to continue their archiving work from home. It also enhances the Image Library to include support for videos, sound clips and large document files as well as improving remote user access and compatibility with mobile devices (tablets & smartphones).

We have instructed Plexus Media (Cromarty) to go ahead with the upgrade to a system they initially wrote for Historylinks almost 20 years ago and it should be live around the end of May.

