

SPRING 2025 NEWSLETTER

HERITAGE HUB OFFICIAL OPENING

On Saturday 5th April 2025 our Heritage Hub extension was officially opened when the **Right Honourable Viscount Thurso** cut a ceremonial ribbon in front of a large audience of donors and funders of the project.

The event marked the culmination of an eight-year long project to deliver more space to display our ever growing collection as well as improved and enlarged storage, more toilets, additional office space and crucially, a multi-use community room.

Going forward, a key aim of the project is to promote the financial resilience of Historylinks.



Rt. Hon Viscount Thurso cuts the ceremonial ribbon with museum volunteers Isla Swanson, Pola Traczyk and MJ Currie in attendance

MORE PHOTOS AND NEWS OF THE OPENING EVENT INSIDE

MUSEUM PERFORMANCE FOR 2024 SEASON

Despite losing admissions & sales income in April owing to the ongoing work on the extension, thanks to the great efforts of our staff and volunteers we managed to recoup this lost income and footfall later in the year.

Opening the museum at weekends in November, December and early January was a success made possible by the new heating system, which is using about 1/3rd of the electricity of the old one!

The attraction of the eleven panels from the **Tapestry of the Highlands & Islands** (*kindly on loan from Inverness Castle*) coupled with the new displays in the extension and the boost from Fibre Fest (see inside) meant our annual footfall actually rose by 5.4% to 5,214 visitors.

Gifts and books sales in the refurbished shop at the entrance were also up, which all contributed to an overall increase of over 12% in earned income in a year shortened to 11 months!

VISITOR SURVEY 2024

Caroline Seymour, our Museum Assistant, coordinates our Museum visitor surveys and prepares a detailed annual report to share with our funders.

Space precludes publishing the full details of the report (available on request), but in 2024/5 we received 2,047 total responses revealing that 27% of our visitors lived outside the UK (up slightly on 2023), 45% lived in Scotland and 28% in the rest of the UK - including someone from every county in England and Wales!

The four most numerous overseas locations were USA (225 responses), Australia (54), Canada (41) and Germany (35). In all, we had responses from visitors from 28 different countries.

When asked, the most popular items mentioned were: Vikings (110), Golf (86), Shops Display (76), Railway (69), Janet Horne (64) and the Dessicated Cat found in the Free Church (47).

What is your favourite item in the museum?

WELCOME TO CATU



Catu is a historical reenactment group connected to Historylinks Museum, whose main area of interest is in the Pictish, Gaelic and Norse era in the North Highlands. The name is derived from local dialect for Cataibh (the Gaelic name for Sutherland) which with Caithness constitutes the Pictish kingdom of Cat.

Catu is based at, and works closely with, Historylinks Museum's staff and volunteers, supporting their aims of helping the community and visitors to have a better understanding of the rich, diverse heritage and culture of the region. This entails working as 'living history' volunteers at Historylinks, and occasionally with other organisations and societies that share its interests throughout Scotland.

We welcome enthusiastic members interested in history or archaeology, who would like to work with our core members to make costume, do traditional crafts, perform music, or cook authentic food and enjoy sharing our interests and skills with others in a social activity. We have monthly meetings, and offer living history demonstrations, special events and workshops at Historylinks and occasionally at other venues.



Sarah Mawson in character



Catu display at Fibre Fest

Members of Catu will learn the crafts and skills to make their own basic kit and portray life in our era. All clothing and equipment is researched and must be authentic and of suitable quality. Members can choose a role and adopt a character with name, rank and appropriate skills. Other members may prefer to concentrate on crafts such as spinning, weaving, embroidery, woodwork, pottery, basketry, cooking food of the period, smith craft or music.

For more information please contact Sarah Mawson or Barb Gray at catudornoch@outlook.com

VOLUNTEER UPDATE

In January Historylinks staff hosted an afternoon tea in the Community Room for our wonderful volunteers to thank them for their help at the museum over the past year.

This was followed by an exchange visit between staff & volunteers from Historylinks and the Tarbat Discovery Centre, Portmahomack on two Sunday afternoons in March. These were both enjoyable and interesting events, forming a link between the two museums on which to build in the future.



Finally, **Lorna Dalton** has retired from the Young Curators Club after many years as a volunteer. Lorna has worked tirelessly with the YCC since its inception and we are so grateful for all she has done. The children and Flora will miss her very much, but we are very pleased to say that Lorna will continue to volunteer Front of House.

Thank you so much for all your hard work over the years, Lorna!

CAN YOU HELP?

There are many ways that people can help us to **Keep the Dornoch Story Alive.**

- **BECOME A MEMBER**

Membership of the charity costs just £20 per year and is the easiest way for everyone to help. If you are not already a member then you can apply via our website at: www.historylinks.org.uk/join-us

- **VOLUNTEER**

To supplement the work of our staff we rely on volunteers. Opportunities exist in reception, archiving and maintenance from as little as one hour per week. If you are interested in joining our team contact **Caroline Seymour** at: museumassistant@historylinks.org.uk

We are particularly keen to appoint a new Treasurer for the Museum (approximately 2 hours per week). If you can help, or know of someone who can, please contact:

chair@historylinks.org.uk

- **LEAVE A LEGACY**

A legacy is the perfect way for you to help ensure the history of Dornoch is preserved for all to enjoy in the future. If you would like to discuss this in confidence with a member of the team please email:

chair@historylinks.org.uk

OPENING DAY

Saturday 5th April saw the Official Opening of the Historylinks Heritage Hub, the culmination of eight years of work by our team of Trustees, committee members, staff and volunteers.

In addition to more display space, the Hub has given us contemporary gallery space and a community room for heritage activities of all kinds.

The sun came out right on cue as Viscount Thurso was piped into the Hub by Willie Fraser accompanied by Alison Davies (Co-Chair). This was followed by a speech from Andrew Senior (Co-Chair) who welcomed Lord Thurso, noting that he is not only a 'weel kent' face in the North Highlands, but that his substantial UK political career in both the House of Commons and now the House of Lords along with his leadership role in Scottish tourism made him an ideal choice to perform the opening ceremony.



Alison Davies, Lord Thurso & Willie Fraser



Opening speech with Lord Thurso, Andrew Senior & Alison Davies

In return, Lord Thurso spoke of his affection for Dornoch and made reference to the hard work of the many often unseen volunteers and their contribution to the charity's vision of 'Keeping the Dornoch Story Alive'.

Lord Thurso then toured the new extension and met many of our funders and supporters, construction professionals and staff team. Alison Davies commented: 'The Hub gives us capacity for exciting new exhibits and many more opportunities for community involvement. This is a landmark moment for Historylinks and we thank everyone who has played a part in reaching our goal.'



Barb Gray (Community Curatorial Programme Coordinator) with George McIntyre (Gordon & Ena Baxter Foundation) and Mrs McIntyre



Peter Wild in front of his Welcome stone



The crowd assembled outside the Hub for the opening ceremony



The official opening received widespread media coverage in both local and national newspapers as well as a feature on BBC Radio Scotland!

ARCHIVE ROTARY SHELVING

Before the dream of a Dornoch Museum became a reality, by virtue of a series of exhibitions on Evelix Valley archaeology and notable Dornoch events, three staunch members of the original Dornoch Heritage Society (DHS) had acquired over 2,000 maps, photographs, documents, reports and objects.

Thus, by the 1998 opening of the Museum the trio of Jimmy Bell, Struan Robertson and Ian Ross-Harper, brought to bear their experience in three areas. Firstly, they engaged professional expertise in the layout of the museum, resulting in the series of alcoves quadrupling the display area. Secondly, they advertised nationally to engage a qualified curator to work on a daily basis to establish protocols for acquisitions, cataloguing and archiving. Thirdly, they defined the geographical area of interest for museum acquisitions and the need for separation in DHS and Museum management.

Within two years, by which time necessary collections protocols had been firmly established, the community interest and support for the museum was demonstrated by an increase to over 4,000 acquisitions.

However, despite best use of museum display areas, the 'Archive Storeroom' began to fill. Documents and photographs, enclosed in clear, protective sleeves, were stored in grey 270 x 82 x 400 mm acid free cardboard boxes, with larger 330 x 270 x 420 mm brown boxes for tissue wrapped objects of various sizes.

Overall archive store protection is achieved by humidity control and insect traps. To maximise storage space, the shelves on all walls of the storeroom were at various heights, but by the end of 2024 total museum acquisitions had reached 15,217 with the archive store at saturation point.

Improving the archive storage capacity formed part of the Heritage Hub project and the installation of a mobile shelving system was the obvious answer to the problem.

However, although the grant from the **National Lottery Heritage Fund** would provide almost 40% of the purchase price, there was still over £6,500 more to find.

Fortuitously in February 2025 the **Dornoch Common Good Fund** came to the rescue with a top-up-grant to match-fund the £3,250 pledged from the Heritage Society, thus enabling the purchase and installation of a suite of 6 mobile shelving units, all of 350mm depth and 2.6 metres high.



The archive room stripped out . . .



re-stocking . . .



and finished! John Barnes showing off the new system.

An individual shelving unit is affixed to the outer walls and the space between them has 2 coupled shelving units capable of lateral movement using triple-arm rotary controls. The top 5 rows of each unit are of 200mm height, capable of holding 40 of the narrow document/photograph grey boxes, and the bottom 4 rows at 325mm height can accommodate 16 large brown boxes of books, bound reports, albums of large size etc.

To our delight we have only half-filled the new shelving units, thus the archive storeroom is future-proofed for at least another 20 years at current rates!

FIBRE FEST 2025 AT THE MUSEUM

The Community Room in the Heritage Hub hosted its first ever weekend event in mid March as part of Fibre Fest, when it became the 5th venue in Dornoch to be used for workshops as part of the annual event now in its twelfth year.

In addition to the workshops, the museum had the eighteenth century silk dress once owned by Katherine Gray of Overskibo and now owned by Barbara Francis of Melbourne, Australia, on display. Dress historian Rebecca Olds was on hand to show her conservation work on the dress and discuss its history, along with the owner who had travelled from Australia!

There was also an exhibit of work by three local students, Isla Swanson, Pola Traczyk & MJ Currie who spent five months researching for their 'Fabric of Time' textiles display.

MJ and Pola both researched the period 1910 to 1920, with Pola looking into women's clothing for the working classes and MJ for the same period for the Higher-class women. Isla researched the Evolution of Victorian women's hats.

The displays were complimented with costumes and hats kindly loaned by the Grantown-on-Spey Museum (*see photo right*) with others being loaned by the local people of Dornoch.

All this created a buzz around the museum which contributed to a record weekend - both in terms of visitor numbers and income.



Thanks to all our funders for their generous support for the Historylinks Heritage Hub project



EVENTS CALENDAR 2025

Saturday May 3rd	Coffee Morning	West Church Hall	10.30 am
Baking, preserves and all the usual tables plus garden plants on sale. Come along and enjoy the craic! FREE entry but donations appreciated.			
Saturday May 3rd	Catu Living History Project	Hub Community Room	1.00 pm
A new group of people interested in early mediaeval life in the area. This will include workshops on a variety of ancient crafts, some attendance in costume at Historylinks events and a general place to discuss Viking and Pictish history. Going forward, <u>meetings will be on the first Saturday of the month</u> at the Historylinks Heritage Hub. For more information please contact Sarah Mawson or Barb Gray via catudornoch@outlook.com			
Tuesday May 20th	Burial Ground Project (1/2)	Dornoch Cathedral	10.00 am
The first day of the project is learning about how to record the burial ground and the headstones etc.. No hard work, but stout shoes / boots and suitable clothing for the weather needed. You are welcome to attend just this session and/or the second one in September (see below). A light lunch is provided. For more information please contact Barb Gray via barb@historylinks.org.uk			
Wednesday May 21st	General Meeting	Hub Community Room	7.30 pm
A general Meeting of members will be held to discuss changes to the constitution recommended by the Trustees. An agenda along with more information will be circulated at least 14 days before the meeting. Members unable to attend in person will have the option of voting by proxy.			
Friday June 20th	Dreams of Peace & Freedom	Dornoch Cathedral	7.30 pm
'Dreams of Peace and Freedom' is a song cycle about the life of David Maxwell Fyfe and his part in the prosecution team at the Nuremburg trials. David's family were cleared from Migdale Mill in the 19th century - a tragedy which inspired David to become a Human Rights lawyer. The show has been performed in London, Liverpool and at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival; it will now be performed in Dornoch, the source of David's inspiration. Tickets £20 each available via the museum - all proceeds to the Cathedral.			
Tuesday July 8th	School Days Project	Hub Community Room	1.30 pm
You are invited to come along to the museum to chat about you days at school in the Dornoch area. If you have photos and memorabilia you would like to share please bring them along. Volunteer opportunity: it would be great if volunteers could help with scribing stories and maybe serving refreshments on the day. For more information please contact Barb Gray via barb@historylinks.org.uk			
Saturday July 19th	Sutherland Show	Dornoch Links	10.00 am
If you are heading down to the Sutherland Show don't forget to pop in and say hello to the Historylinks volunteers on their stand.			
Thursday Sept 11th	Burial Ground Project (2/2)	Dornoch Cathedral	10.00 am
Subject to permissions being obtained, the second day of the Burial Ground project will cover the cleaning of specific headstones and the upkeep of the burial ground for the future. As with the first day, no hard work but stout shoes / boots and suitable clothing for the weather needed. A light lunch will again be provided. For more information please contact Barb Gray via barb@historylinks.org.uk			