



Trustees' report 2021 (2020/21 year)

A challenging year

Our year started just a couple of weeks after the COVID lock-down in March 2020. I returned from holiday just one day before the lockdown, to find a very different country from the one I had left a few weeks earlier. At the start of the year, we feared a significant challenge that would diminish our financial reserves that we had so painstakingly built up. Museums were ordered to close or to remain shut, and any prospect of a normal summer season quickly ebbed.

Yet despite everything, and despite the terrible impact of Covid on so many people and families, Groam House Museum came out of the experience stronger and more resilient. Thanks to financial support offered by the Scottish Government through The Highland Council, and to funding made available by Museums and Galleries Scotland, the worst financial effects of the pandemic were avoided, and we were able to improve our long term sustainability by replacing our heating, lighting and dehumidification systems and improve the insulation in the museum loft. By the year end our financial reserves had risen from £35,574 (at the end of March 2020) to £39,550 (at the end of March 2021).

The museum remained closed until late August, shortly after the restrictions on museum openings had been lifted. Even so, our capacity to open was severely limited by the number of volunteers comfortable with staffing the museum, and the restrictions on the number of visitors we could permit into the museum at one time. We opened only on Thursdays through Sundays in the afternoons, with four bookable sessions in each, permitting just one family group at a time to be in the museum. We closed again for the winter in mid December – a short season, but well attended within the constraints of Covid.

Last year we reported on our considerable success in winning funding from Museums and Galleries Scotland and Creative Scotland, for a total of £73,750 to share the creativity of Celtic art through a combination of dance and animation, and the development of an interactive website to make available works from our George Bain collection and to encourage artists and craftspeople world-wide to contribute to the collective understanding and celebration of Celtic art. The Covid pandemic took its toll to some extent in limiting some of the work that we could do on this, though the full range of activities will be completed, in a longer than planned timescale. During the time the project was running, our George Bain curator, Jo Clements had to take extended sick leave; I am pleased to say she is now back at work, but in the meantime, Jill Harden covered for her absence, assisted by a part time project administrator, Jenny Brogden. MGS were very supportive in allowing flexibility in the project to accommodate these difficulties.

The highlights for the 2020/21 year can be summarised as:

- A fascinating **exhibition**, in addition to our permanent exhibition of Pictish sculpture, “The Book of Kells – some mysteries revealed” in which local artist Thomas Keyes worked with us to show a scriptorium in an early medieval monastery (perhaps Rosemarkie?) – Thomas even reproduced the pigments, vellum and tools the scribes would have used, and went on to replicate pages from the Book of Kells itself. This was set alongside a scene depicting the desk of George Bain, who also studied the Book of Kells in great detail, and developed an understanding of the geometry underlying the Celtic art contained within it. In our downstairs exhibition, Thomas Keyes added to our exhibition of Pictish art by suggesting how geometric methods could have been behind the design of the Rosemarkie cross-slab and other stones in the exhibition. Side by side, the exhibitions showed the comparison between Bain’s analysis of Celtic art and Keyes’ analysis of Pictish design.
- Excitingly, the new **George Bain Celtic Art Collection website** (grant-aided by Museums Galleries Scotland) was developed this year by an IT company Pooka to a brief designed by Jo Clements, our George Bain curator. We’re very pleased with it! So lots of us have been involved in creative writing, photography and scanning training, and have since been busy creating content for this new digital resource. Once launched it will enable people to subscribe, practitioners to show their own Celtic art work, and GHM to promote the hundreds of Celtic art items in the George Bain collection.
- This year we also successfully bid for a National Heritage Lottery Fund grant for our new on-line mini-exhibitions - **Doorways to the Collection**. Guided by Jen Shaw, a museum professional, we’ve now got a way of putting together pop-up displays, both virtual and actual. And they have their own interactives – quizzes, jigsaws and story-telling – so we can develop new versions over the coming year.
- Successful **bids for support** funding during COVID
 - £10,000 from The Highland Council as a Business Support Grant
 - £2,000 from MGS to cover the costs of re-opening under Covid-19 restrictions
 - £8,000 from the National Lottery Heritage Fund for emergency work
 - And £9,000 from MGS to cover recovery and resilience development.
- Continuing work to document, catalogue and photograph the hundreds of items in our **collections**.
- **Replacement** of the ageing heaters in the museum with more efficient units; replacement of the lighting, including the installation of track lighting to the upstairs exhibition area; replacement of the dehumidifiers with more efficient units; addition of more insulation to the loft of the museum.
- **Volunteer** numbers remained steady, despite many of them not being able to participate actively during the time of Covid. As always we need more volunteers, who are the lifeblood of the museum. The volunteers themselves do much to ensure a strong cohesion and camaraderie which contributes the sense of wellbeing which volunteering offers.
- **Visitor** numbers dropped dramatically on account of the museum being closed for most of the season, and then open to only a limited extent later on. However, thanks to our use of Zoom (a software system that provides video conferencing) we were able to extend our outreach beyond our usual geographic boundaries and reach a world-wide audience. This started in 2020/21 but really came into its own in 2021/22.

- **New ways of working** – the Museum has been looking at new ways of working for some time – already exploiting new technology for its displays and outreach – but Covid encouraged us to up our game and to start using video conferencing systems both to replace our normal face-to-face internal meetings and as a means of engaging with our wider audiences. We took out a licence for the Zoom video conferencing system, and have continued to use it. Meanwhile, with our volunteers also affected by the lockdown restrictions, we saw an increase in the use of social media for keeping in touch with our volunteers and enabling them to continue to support each other.
- The **shop** continued to excel – with the shop team selecting a wonderful range of items, relevant to our collections and as far as possible, the work of local craftspeople. In line with our new ways of working, we continued to develop our on-line shop capability.
- A new **ticketing system** was introduced in September, to help us manage bookings to attend the museum. Offered free by Art Fund, the system had a few teething problems but has served us well and continues to do so. A key advantage is that Art Fund makes no deductions from the contributions made. We now use the ticketing system – Arttickets – for a wide range of functions apart from museum visits – on-line workshops, lectures, and even recordings of events.
- A new **contactless donations system** was introduced during the year – funded by MGS, and supplied by Regium Consulting specifically for charities. With people carrying less cash as a result of Covid, the contactless card payment system allows visitors to the museum to donate money through their credit or debit cards. Already we have seen an increase in the donations as a result.
- The long-awaited re-development of the **Pictish Trail** started during the year, funded by The Highland Council. Groam House Museum was an active participant in the project steering group, and our chair took on the task of developing a mobile phone app to enable visitors to take a self-guided tour of the new Trail.
- On a less positive note, Rosehaugh Estate gave notice during the year that they intended to re-develop the stables block, and that as a result we would have to vacate the property – luckily with something like 2 years to make preparations.

Future Developments

For the future, the museum is now well-positioned and well equipped to continue to make best use of its technology to address a wider, global audience for many of its activities. We plan to offer the lecture programme and some of our workshops over Zoom during 2021/22, and potentially using a hybrid of physical presentation and Zoom access in the longer term.

The decision, some years ago, to pursue the acquisition of Groam House from The Highland Council is now progressing; we have appointed a solicitor who is now in discussion with their opposite number in the Council.

The need to move our store facility from Rosehaugh has prompted us to look at other alternatives, closer to the museum building. An opportunity has arisen to apply to acquire a small property on Bridge Street, Rosemarkie from The Highland Council under the Community Asset Transfer scheme (CAT). A provisional application has been submitted both to the Council for CAT, and to the Scottish Land Fund as a potential funder of the acquisition itself (but not its subsequent development). The application requires us to make some adjustments to our constitution (mainly to define a geographic focus for our work, in addition to our existing community of interest). The views of members will be sought once more is known about the potential of acquiring the property on Bridge Street,

and members will also be asked to consider and agree possible changes to the constitution.

Prepared by A D Maclean, Chair, on behalf of the Board of Trustees
19 November 2021

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'A D Maclean', with a large, sweeping underline stroke.