

WEST HIGHLAND MUSEUM NEWSLETTER

TAIGH-TASGAIDH NA GAIDHEALTACHD AN IAR

November 2012

MESSAGE FROM THE CHAIRMAN

We can get quite far in this life with friends and supporters and, as a reader of this Newsletter, you are one of these! Many people have great affection for our Museum and this has sustained us for nigh on 100 years. We are very grateful for your support; thank you.

You will understand that I have very mixed feelings in writing this column as Chairman; humbled at the honour and

confidence that my fellow Trustees have displayed but very saddened at Richard Sidgwick's resignation. Richard has been a life-long supporter of the West Highland Museum and I am very pleased that he remains involved, having brought together the start of the Commando display.

We have recently appointed Lilian Macdonald and Caroline Gooch as trustees, to replace Richard Sidgwick and Tearlach Macfarlane. The combined support of these two

gentlemen, in many ways, must have exceeded the life of the

Museum. I will return to this in our Annual Report.

From the Commandos to Baron Munchausen, from volunteers to visitors, I do hope that you find something of interest in this excellent Newsletter. We are very grateful to the contributors, especially Vanessa Martin, the Editor.

As we enter the season of gift-buying, please also tell your friends about our excellent shop which has steadily built up the best collection in town!

With best wishes for Christmas and the New Year.

John C Hutchison
Chairman of Trustees

MESSAGE FROM THE MANAGER



Museum Manager
Colleen Foggo

I cannot believe I have now been working at the Museum for over eight months. The time has flown by which is always a good sign. A lot has happened in the time I have been here and I must take this opportunity to thank our merry band of volunteers and Sonja our Volunteer Co-ordinator for their help this year. A special big thank you also to Chris Robinson, Chairman of the Management Committee and to Sally Archibald for all their support.

We have made changes in the shop this year and they seem to

have paid off. The sales totals are all up on last year and hopefully this will continue for the rest of the year. We have re-arranged the stock and have taken in new lines. So, please do pop in to see for yourself and recommend our shop to all your friends, as we would like to see more locals using the shop.

We have had a few temporary exhibitions in the Museum this year. We had trials bikes on display until May, which were kindly donated by Rab Paterson from the Scottish Six Day Trials. The popular Model T car exhibit was on display until late October 2012, thanks to Neil Tuckett. In May, we set up a small photographic display to commemorate the Queen's Diamond Jubilee which included a showing of a Pathe News clip of the Queen's visit to Fort William in 1958. This clip showed that it was not Provost Margaret Murphy's fault that she ended up on the red carpet instead of the Queen. We presently have an Olympic Torch on display that local girl Lorna Linfield very kindly lent to

us. This is the most photographed item in the museum and has attracted quite a few locals to the Museum. In September we set up a photographic display in Room 1 called St Kilda 36. St. Kilda 36 is a collection of 36 colour prints showing contemporary views of the St. Kildan archipelago. The exhibition shows the islands unique wildlife, architecture, military presence and the ever changing landscape as captured by Lochaber man, William Cameron.

Colleen Foggio
Museum Manager



Lorna Linfield with the Olympic torch

THE COMMANDO EXHIBITION

It is now more than six years since the trustees and management committee began to give serious thought to the modernisation and integration of our existing building with an extension to be constructed on vacant land which we own to the rear of the present building. The scheme has been on hold for the past three years because of funding difficulties, but consideration of the scheme has provided welcome impetus for development.

One of the ideas under discussion at the time was the provision of a series of temporary exhibitions based on subjects of local or topical interest and, amongst many others, the enduring connection between Lochaber and the Royal Marine Commandos was identified as a frontrunner. Since then, this has gradually gathered pace and we are now in the happy position of being able to announce the opening

of our initial display of Commando exhibits during the Armistice services over the week end of 10th and 11th November 2012.

Material is gradually being gathered from a number of sources and we anticipate that publicity surrounding the opening will generate many more loans or gifts. A whole room will be dedicated to the display but the facilities we can offer will inevitably be of a temporary nature until such times as we have sufficient material to set up a permanent exhibition.

We have the full and generous support of The



Commando Veterans Association whose chairman is going to open the display on 10th November and all veterans visiting the area will be invited. In addition, we will have memorabilia belonging to Mr Raymond Hervo, a surviving

Commando who made his home in Fort William and 'Gentle' Johnny Ramensky, one of the most famous members of the Glasgow criminal fraternity, who trained at Achnacarry and carried out clandestine work blowing safes behind enemy lines.



Johnny Ramensky

Whilst still embryonic, we anticipate that this will become a major point of interest for young and old alike and over the course of the weekend, we plan to bring the two generations together, when Lochaber High School pupils will interview veterans who saw service during World War Two.

Richard Sidgwick

THE MUSEUM BOOK & GIFT SHOP

During the winter closure period our Museum shop was revamped, updated and refreshed and the suggested route around the Museum now directs visitors through the shop as the final part of their museum journey. After six months our volunteers have noticed that most of our visitors now go through the shop and browse on their way out of the Museum.

We have worked hard over the last few months to identify our best sellers and to make better use of our sales data. With help from Alistair Ness, owner of the Granite House gift shop, our volunteers and the Management Committee, we have made a real difference to our shop sales figures and profit margins. Our challenge remains to further promote our shop with locals and to raise awareness of our gift and book ranges.

We have increased our choice of general interest books, academic books, maps and children's books, which have proved increasingly popular over the last six months. Our book prices span from 99p for children's books to £30 for a hardback copy of Victorian Scotland, with a wide variety of prices in between.

Our extensive gift section includes postcards, stationery, notebooks, pens, pencils, hand engraved Jacobite glassware, paperweights, locally made chocolate, honey products, greeting cards, replica packs, Museum T-shirts, Museum eco shopping bags, local DVDs, vintage games, WW2 themed tins and fridge magnets, cross stitch kits, replica coins, pin badges, coasters, key rings, Jacobite themed mugs and railway posters. Prices range from 35p for a postcard to £110 for a Jacobite hand engraved spirit decanter. We also have our own DVDs at £8 each; George Scott's "Capturing 1950s Lochaber" and the "Strip the Willow" Fort William town

centre event held in 1997 in honour of the Museum's 75th Anniversary.

There is something for everyone in our shop and it is a great place to look for birthday and Christmas gifts.

Sonja McLachlan

THE IMPORTANCE OF VOLUNTEERS IN SOCIETY TODAY

Changing social patterns connected to earlier retirement and increased life expectancy mean that the country now has a substantial resource of active, affluent and intelligent people who, after a busy working life, have time, energy and enthusiasm which are of great value to society.

It becomes increasingly obvious that the State cannot be the universal provider in a world where the demands made of it are ever increasing. There is, therefore, an opportunity for a generation that has been

fortunate in living in a period over the past 50 years which has been characterised by world peace, a settled and prosperous way of life for most, and the opportunity to amass capital on a scale unseen before to continue with their contribution to 'The Common Weal.'

This opportunity isn't confined to those who have retired recently; many in a younger category now live alone and the companionship and stimulation of a volunteer part time job can be a boon. In case I give the impression that volunteering is for 'oldies' the wonderful example set by 70,000 volunteers at the London Olympics, many of them in their teens, reminds us all of the value of this principle, both to the volunteer and to the recipient of their assistance. Volunteering, whether for a charity, an organisation to support those less fortunate or a local event in need of assistance is a rewarding and satisfying experience irrespective of age.

At the West Highland Museum, we have benefitted beyond all expectations from the volunteer force which largely replaced paid staff at the beginning of 2011. Over the past 18 months or so, we have built up a team of about 35 volunteers who have brought much more to our organisation than I had ever imagined. At first glance, their greatest contribution is in staffing the reception area and providing information and a welcome to our visitors. But, there is an even more important component in their joint efforts. Each volunteer brings his or her own personality which provides us with talent, enthusiasm, energy and cheery dispositions that enhance what we have to offer beyond my expectations. I accept that is much easier to be the proverbial ray of sunshine when you are only working with us for half a day each week, rather than for the full five days!

The age of our volunteers ranges from students who are broadening their work experience to those who are well past normal retirement

age, though in most cases, you would be hard pressed to know it; in between we have many who may have retired early, parents whose children have left home or those in part time work who are able and willing to give of their time.

They all help with opening up and closing down, shop sales and ensuring that all parts of the building are presentable for the general public, sometimes no mean task at the end of a wet Lochaber day when upwards of 300 people have traipsed through the building, some only looking for a loo; we make them as welcome as anybody else. Seasonal 'housekeeping' jobs are vital over the winter; these may range from a major spring clean after building works, opening displays cabinets and cleaning all exhibits, down to laundering Victorian costumes. Supervision of all of this is managed by Sonja McLachlan, our Volunteer Co-ordinator, who manages the rota and organises training and duties

for other volunteers who have special skills.



**Volunteer Co-ordinator
Sonja McLachlan**

Finally, I should add that we have a small group of professionals, some retired, who help with business planning, retail advice, architectural and surveying skills, or who add their experience to our existing resources. Our paid local professional advisors invariably charge reduced fees in recognition of our role in Lochaber life; to them, our thanks also.

This is our volunteer resource; as well as all the above benefits, it brings a degree of community involvement which

was one of its primary objectives and the museum trustees and management committee are grateful indeed for the contribution it makes to our affairs.

It is estimated that the example of the Olympic volunteers has prompted more than 100,000 people to offer their help to a variety of good causes; may their spirit live on !

Richard Sidgwick

If you would like to help as a volunteer in the Museum, contact Sonja McLachlan.

Telephone 01397 702169, or Email sonja@westhighlandmuseum.org.uk

Youth outreach

There is a flourishing youth membership at the Museum. Since 1998 young people between the ages of six and fourteen have met once a month to participate in a variety of activities and really get to know the Museum. Graduates from the Saturday Club have

gone on to become volunteers. Kirsteen and Lee have worked at reception welcoming visitors, before going on to higher education and paid employment. Fergus has now taken their place.

The Museum also works closely in conjunction with local schools to bring history to life. The dedicated Education Room might ring with the war cries of Vikings or Jacobites. Little hands use quern stones to grind grain as early man would have done, or to whack a piece of carpet with a Victorian carpet beater. Slide shows give students a picture of old Fort William, and tours around the Museum's display cases explain the story of crofting and the sorrow of the Highland clearances. Even High School students will pause before the treasure from the Spanish galleon, or the rifle used in the still unsolved Appin murder. Every attempt is made to ensure that learning about history is fun and that museums are magically places!

Betty Bruce

What do they think of us?

In July/August 200 of our visitors filled in a questionnaire about themselves and the museum. It's 3 years since our last survey and we learnt a lot. Just over 50 % of visitors came in simply as they were passing by, whilst 13% from guide book recommendation, 9 % were recommended by friends and family, 5% from the tourist office - only one visitor was prompted by our website. 35% of visitors came from abroad and we had many more younger folk than in 2008. 95% were here on holiday and 37% reported they would not have come in if we still had an entry fee. This must be an underestimate as we increased our footfall by 350% when we "went free". 65% were at least moderately interested in a Commando exhibition, which is reassuring with our present plans.

The visitor's interest in the museum was about the same as in 2008 at around 85/100.

Approval of the shop increased by 20 points to 80 since 2008 but the highest score remains for the welcome given by our staff – almost 95%!

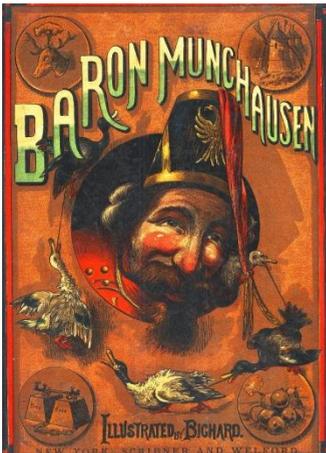
Favoured displays were "everything" (!), with the secret portrait, Jacobite display, Highland history, the Victorian display and then animals and birds. "Needing improvement" was nothing (68/100), then concern about labelling, the problems with orientation and a few others. We were asked to think about some audio-visual displays, children's activities, overcoming language barriers and offering guided tours. Many thought we should grow bigger – all encouraging and guiding.

Full details of the survey are available on request to Colleen.

Chris Robinson

Lead on Ben Nevis!

"The Surprising Adventures of Baron Munchausen" is a classic of world literature first published in London in 1785, anonymously, but by one Rudolph Eric Raspè a German mineralogist, metallurgist, author, curator, librarian, translator, industrial spy and conman. The Barons adventures spawned "Munchausen's syndrome" – so named by Dr Richard Asher in 1951 to label a condition where persons feign illness, often provoking hospitalisation and even surgery.



"The Surprising Adventures"

Raspè's Baron Munchausen was arguably the world's greatest liar:

The Baron rides through a snow storm latching his horse onto a convenient spike only to wake in the morning to find that in the overnight thaw his horse was dangling from a high church steeple.

On a long voyage his boat is attacked by a sword fish leaving a rent below the water line through which the sea floods in. But the Baron saves the day when, "being of Dutch parentage", he knows exactly what to do and employs his commodious bum to block the breach and save the day, "though I was a little cold".

Whilst in a tropical country he suddenly finds himself attacked on one side by a lion and on the opposite by a crocodile. As they both charge simultaneously toward him, he deftly steps aside at the very last moment and as the crocodile opens its jowls the charging lion impales itself between the reptile jaws - choking

it - thus rewarding the Baron with two trophies at once.



The lion & the crocodile versus Munchausen

In 1793 the minister of Kilmallie Rev. Mr Alexander Fraser penned his contribution to the “Old Statistical Account “(OSA) reporting a “lately discovered vein of lead ore upon the west side of Ben Nevis. It is four or five inches thick...and seems to grow thicker and richer as it descends. The access is not difficult and is about 300 yds. from the bottom of the valley” (Glen Nevis).

But today’s Geologists will tell you there is and never has been any lead on Ben Nevis. A saunter up the tourist track reveals two basalt dykes which cross the path between the two

aluminium bridges at a height of 900ft.



The 'vein of lead' on Ben Nevis!

About 1780, our Rudolph, deported from his native Germany for fraud, sort refuge quietly in London, where he was expelled from the Royal Society and later was working as an industrial spy on mines in Cornwall, where he wrote Munchausen’s travels. Probably again exposed he later met in with Sir John Sinclair of Ulbster in Caithness, the instigator of the OSA. who through the services of the Highland Agricultural Society sponsored him on a tour of the Highlands to discover the mineral wealth which was” bound to be there”.

In late 1789 he was in Sutherland and was reported to have found copper, lead, iron, cobalt, and manganese on Sir John's estate. But history repeated itself - he was found to be inserting mineralized rock specimens in crevices only to return later with his patron to "discover" the lode. No more monthly reports in the "Scots Magazine" of his Highland Tour. He absconded and later found himself at a copper mine in the West of Ireland where he lies near Killarney in an unmarked grave. A simple resting place for a far from simple man.



Bust of Rudolph Raspè

The Scots Magazine in 1789 had earlier triumphed the

discoveries of Mr Raspè the "famous German Geologist", on Tiree, Mull, Iona of Marble and Lead – and at the Lurga Mine in Morvern en route to Caithness.

Our Rudolph would have passed through Fort William and examined Ben Nevis.....

Had he been searching 200 years later he might well have found real lead.... T'is rumoured that after the closure of the observatory some enterprising pioneer recyclers decided the lead on the Observatory roof no longer served a useful purpose and they carried up and filled several oil drums and rolled them down the hill to seek their reward at sea level. But gravity took control and, out of control, the barrels bounded down the mountain scattering their contents far and wide So add "seer" to Rudolph's talents?

Chris Robinson



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