

Issue No 9
Winter 2010

Editor:
Martin Gostwick,
Secretary

Hugh's News

Newsletter of
The Friends of Hugh Miller



***Festive greetings & best wishes
for the New Year to all Friends
of Hugh, Lydia and their family***



STOP PRESS

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Professor Iain Stewart, leading geoscientist and presenter of the recent BBC series Making Scotland's Landscape, has agreed, subject to future TV commitments, to be the public speaker at our next annual meeting.

The probable venue and date will be Fortrose Community Theatre, Saturday May 7th. Please note this is provisional. Confirmation and further details will be circulated when they become available.

STOP PRESS

SAFE HARBOUR FOUND!

A MAGNIFICENT £600,000 lump sum donation to the Hugh Miller Museum has turned its fortunes around at a stroke. We can also report that our Friends group has just received a separate donation of £5,000 to help in its support work for the Museum.

The £600,000 bequest is the talk of Cromarty, and indeed the wider community, and it is fair to say it has been greeted with great acclaim – and many expressions of surprise at the scale of generosity. The National Trust for Scotland (NTS), in announcing the bequest at its annual general meeting on 25 September, confirmed that it has secured the future of our beloved Museum and Birthplace Cottage for years to come.

All our members will wish to extend our most heartfelt congratulations and thanks to the anonymous donor and to the Trust's Development Department for achieving the agreement on the sum and the terms of the gift. These terms ensure that the donation is "ring-fenced" for expenditure solely on this property, and on its operational costs, principally staff salaries and wages and restoring the maximum possible opening days and hours. The terms also provide for the Trust to consult closely with The Friends over The Museum's management, and we can



Master thatcher Graham Carter is handed another bundle of reeds by assistant Helen Annan early on in his marathon labours

confirm that our Chairman has been in discussions, particularly pertaining to arrangements for next season.

From these discussions, we have been advised that a full-time post of Curator/Manager will shortly be advertised with a view to the appointee taking up post on 1 March next year. Our Senior Visitor Assistant, Mrs Zooulla Spirou, will continue in that role, and the employment of a further visitor assistant is envisaged. The 2011 Season will provide opening 7 days a week, 1.00pm - 5.00pm from 1 April to 30 September, and for three days a week in October.



Swallows successfully nested under the Cottage eaves throughout the thatching upheaval around them, to everyone's delight

The descendants in whose honour the donation was made, are Marian McKenzie Johnston, Bright Gordon and Lydia Clarke, all of whom have recently passed away. The sisters were born Middleton, granddaughters of Sir Thomas Middleton of Rosefarm, Cromarty, whose wife Lydia was Hugh Miller's granddaughter. The Middletons have been farmers in The Black Isle for over 200 years, with Bright Gordon being the last.

This gift will now create a special fund called the Middleton Fund. Donors can make a contribution to the Middleton Fund if they so wish and should contact the NTS development department on 0844-493-2422 for further details. The money provides a springboard for the Museum to continue with the forward progress in its attractions and interest to visitors which it has enjoyed for the last 20 years, but which was placed in jeopardy as a result of the Trust's financial difficulties in 2009/10.



The new Lydia Garden begins to bloom

The Museum and Cottage has been sustained in the Season just passed with the outstanding help of a team of 12 volunteers, and it is hoped that many of them will continue to be able to offer their services on request.

We were able to open Lydia Garden on 10 April, and August and September saw the Cottage roof rethatching project reach a triumphantly successful completion. Highland architects awarded Miller's Yard winner for the best new Public Open Space in the whole region in 2010.

As we look forward, we know that no heritage centre can afford to mark time, or rest on its laurels. There has

to be a programme of continuous development of content and renewed public interest.

Every theme of Miller's life has contemporary and future relevance – Miller the artisan and then craftsman in stone, Miller the folk and social historian, the pioneer geologist, the campaigning newspaper editor whose issues remain with us.

With the significant boost to its own finances, the Friends is in a much stronger position to extend the range of its activities in the Museum's support. Among the projects which have been identified for taking forward, are:

- A new edition of Miller's *Old Red Sandstone*, with introduction by Michael Taylor and Ralph O'Connor
- Publication of Lydia Fraser Miller's novel, *Passages in the Life of an English Heiress*.

We can only emphasise that, while the donations substantially underwrite our undertakings, we can best ensure further progress with more members, so can we invite you to make a new New Year resolution to try to join up someone - or two - from within your own circles of families, colleagues and friends?



....GOOD SHELTER TOO

By Martin Gostwick

A GOLDEN era has opened up for the Birthplace Cottage with the completion of its magnificent new thatched roof. We say golden, because the thatch glows like a newly harvested wheatfield – which is not surprising since its crowning glory is of tight-packed layers of wheat straw.

In its 300-year history the Cottage's fragile fabric has been rescued several times from imminent dereliction. Since it came into the care of the National Trust for Scotland in 1938, the roof has been completely relaid twice. The Cottage's last thatch of reed, laid in 1977 and sourced from the River Tay in Perthshire, had worn thin and started to leak last year, and the Trust, in consultation with Historic Scotland, decided its full replacement was essential.

Because of its rarity as a roof cover, the number of thatchers is also very limited to do the work, and the Trust was fortunate when English master thatcher Graham Carter wandered in to the Cottage one summer's day and volunteered himself for the job. Trust surveyor Glyn Young took him on, based on his work on the cottages in the conservation village of Fortingall in Perthshire. It is a capital project, which has cost, including timber restoration and ancillary works by other trades, about £35,000, to which Historic Scotland's annual repair grant scheme contributed substantially.

Graham Carter is 43, hailing from the village of Yaxley, near Peterborough, at the edge of the Cambridgeshire fens. He is the youngest member of the East Midlands Master Thatchers' Association. He has been a journeyman thatcher working across England, and Scotland for over 25 years. He loves his work with a passion that shines through, both in his working in good weather, or when "dodging the spots," his terms for pouring rain, and in his enthusiastic conversations with visitors fascinated by the sight of conservation in action.

The reed had to be imported from Turkey, since the River Tay source was not available last year, but the Turkish material is just as strong, and as near like for like as could be obtained. The quantity for the job was some 1600 bundles, delivered to site in successive trailerloads from storage on a nearby farm. The bundles were an imposing sight on arrival. Each golden reed measures approximately 7ft long, tipped with feathery ears. The other materials are the wheat straw for the vital ridge cap, and hazelwood for the fixing spars.



A highlight of the thatching project was a visit from members of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB). Led by Historic Scotland architect Stephen Watt, among the group were five surveyors and architects, and four fellow craftsmen. They animatedly discussed with Graham Carter the many different methods of thatching in various parts of the Highlands and Islands.



Top Left: Thatched cottage front long view
 Top Right: Stack and platform at the cottage side
 Above: Stack and platform on the Yard side
 Right: Graham Carter on the ridge
 Below Left: The old thatch comes off
 Below Right: The new thatch arrives





Above: View of thatch with sea beyond

Right: Graham Carter unrolling a bundle

Below Left: Graham Carter with legget (dressing tool)

Below Right: Graham Carter fixing bundles

*Bottom Left: Graham Carter, Zooulla Spirou, Martin Gostwick
with fossil in Miller House*

Bottom Right: View of the ridge pattern





The ridge roll



Graham Carter with a bundle



Fixing stays in the ridge

Graham's tools are very rough and ready, which is perhaps surprising when most trades use power tools nowadays. Several of them are home-made: "It's whatever works well for you," he says. His principal tool for shaping the reed, is a "dresser," also known as a "legget," which he uses to pat surfaces down to a smooth finish from base to top of roof. The legget is formed of old curtain rails. "Some guys use horseshoe nails, or other bits of old metal.

The reed is laid in courses one on top of the other, some 12 courses in all. Steel spikes fix the courses to the timber framework below. Each course overlaps the one below, altogether creating a thickness of some 16 inches – about four inches thicker than might be found in, for example, southern England, because of the need for greater protection against the salt air and high winds of the Moray Firth. Graham stresses that weatherproofing isn't only about thickness – it's also about the strength of the raw material and the tightness of the packing.

Among many other details to admire are the curves atop the front windows sitting under the eaves, like blond surprised eyebrows. At the rear, you can distinguish sweeps of reed curling inwards, left to right, right to left, each side of the skylights. "You couldn't lay it straight up and down, or you'd have no edge round the windows. The reed itself is forming the eaves," Graham explains.

The key to the whole job is the ridge of straw at the apex of the roof, which caps the reed underneath, and which Graham says requires equal skills to construct. It is composed of wheat straw, because it is more pliable. The straw is supplied by specialist growers, because wheat produced on most farms has been shortened, and weakened with nitrogen-based fertilisers.

When you see the finished product, you would never guess there is some three quarters of a ton of straw up there, or four of the great bales you see in the fields these days. It has to be shaken out of its bales with a tine fork then wetted to soften it. Straw is pulled from the front of a heap, and then drawn together to make a "yealm." Four yealms tied together make a bundle. Each bundle is then pushed hard by hand against the one before, until the whole ridge and topsides are covered in one dense wedge, to a depth each side of about 2.5ft.

The wedge is secured with some 2000 hazel spars. These Graham splits from the round with a hatchet, and then shapes them with a "spar hook," very similar to a billhook. It is another aspect of



Shaping spars

Graham's meticulous approach that he makes up a lot of the spars himself. He says: "This is extra work. Most guys will just use ready bought-in spars. Spar-making is a trade in itself. Hand on heart, I'm putting a lot more into this job than most people would ever notice. I do it for my own job satisfaction." The hazel is fixed into the straw in three forms. First, rods each about 7ft long are laid across the whole ridge. Then spars which have been bent and twisted into hoop shapes are driven through the straw into the reed below. Finally, stave-like "flats" are laid all the way across in criss-crossing diamond patterns.

He has a wicked-looking "eave cutter" for "edging" -

shaving the bottom ends of the ridge, to give them their marvellously crisp, uniformly straight finish. It is a broad-bladed knife which he hones every few minutes with a large sharpening stone.

Graham describes the whole construction as "a thick, block-cut ridge," which provides maximum protection. It is a thing of beauty; however Graham once more underlines that every feature is based on practicality, not decoration. He says: "A lot of people think thatching is the ultimate in making a picturesque cottage, and I can see it with a poet's eye too. But above all, I'm a realist."



Edging

He comments in general about tools and roofing techniques: "Every thatcher has their own way of working. No thatcher is wrong. If the work lasts, then it's been done right." He goes on: "There may be better thatchers down south; there probably are, but they don't always do their best. This is 'my' roof, I am treating it like it's the roof to my own house, doing the very best I can. That's my work ethic, and when I've finished you can have your roof back. And I'll stick my neck out and say this one will last 50 years."

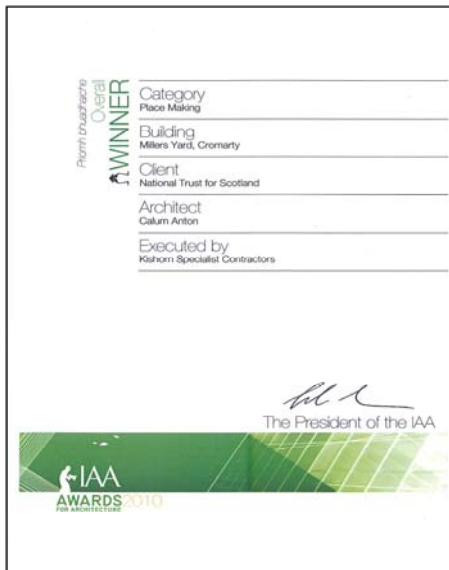
We museum staff believe we know that Hugh Miller, the journeyman stonemason, would have admired the journeyman thatcher's work. He would have questioned, evaluated and recorded every stage of the process, as we have been doing, and praised Graham for a good job, well done. Graham in turn showed his appreciation of the man by presenting the Museum with a large ammonite, which he had collected as a boy, 35 years ago, in a quarry near his home. "I have been hoping all this time to find it a good home, and now I have. I relate strongly to this man, a craftsman and a perfectionist in the same mould as myself."

The golden hue of the roof will remain for about a year, Graham says, then begin to weather into a silvery grey, and so for next season, visitors will still be able to enjoy it in its first "harvest" glow. Even when gone silvergrey, its textures, shapes and patterns will continue to be a marvel.



MILLER'S YARD TOP PRIZE: NEW VISION "WHERE NONE BEFORE"

MILLER'S YARD has been awarded the best public open space created in the entire Highlands and Islands over the last two years, by the region's professional architects.



The IAA Award certificate

The Award for "Place Making" was presented by the Inverness Architects Association (IAA) to project architect Calum Anton of Fortrose in a grand ceremony at the Strathpeffer Spa Pavilion on 12 November

These were the second set of awards established by the IAA in a bid to refute public criticism of new building in the region, encapsulated in the word "carbuncles."

IAA president Calum Maclean said the theme of the awards was how to respond to life lived in the far north, "at the edge," with new vision, and ideas that are compelling and inspiring - all the more needed in the current climate of austerity.

The Place Making category covered external space, between buildings and in their context of streetscape and landscape. The Yard won first place in the Highland Central area, then the final award covering Shetland and Orkney, Highland North, Highland West, Moray and the Western Isles as well.

Leading architect Andrew Wright said, in presenting Calum with the prize – an engraved glass paperweight, - that he was to be congratulated on having confronted what was originally an "uninviting space sandwiched between buildings all at different levels.

"He has drawn on the threads of Hugh Miller's life to transform this space in a way that is bound to be enjoyed by the visitor. High quality finishes are reconciled with the inclusion of artworks to make this a special place where none existed before."

The judges noted how the two terraces and sweeping path allowed the visitor to rise gradually to the upper level in a comfortable and interesting way.

The design created an outdoor extension to the museum that could be used as a forum for learning about Miller. Fundamental to it was the use of a wide range of stone appropriate to Miller's works and reflecting his dedication to the pursuit of knowledge through his study of fossils.

The three professional judges for the Final Awards were Andrew Wright, David Somerville, and Stuart Black. They were supported by two prominent lay figures. These were Inverness-based fashion designer Sandra Murray, who created the Queen's outfit for the opening of the Scottish Parliament and former Labour minister Brian Wilson, founder of the independent paper West Highland Free Press .

Accepting the award, Calum Anton said: "I hope many of you will come to Cromarty to see the place. I know you will enjoy it as much as I enjoyed it making it."

The Friends adds its congratulations to Calum, and to the National Trust for Scotland staff and contractors who carried out the works. Calum implemented a concept design from the Trust's Gardens Department, modifying and developing it to practical completion, including the commissioning of new artworks, especially the centrepiece ammonite sculpture by Helen Denerley.



MAGIC VISITS – HISTORY IN THE MAKING

TWO marvellous visits by groups of descendants to the Museum this summer and autumn have underlined what vital living history means through exciting ongoing family links.

First came the MACKAYS from America, kin of Hugh and Lydia's younger daughter Bessie Miller Mackay. Bessie is of course celebrated as the wife of the Rev Norman Mackay, Free Church minister of Lochinver. She collected invaluable her mother's memories of life in Miller House and in Edinburgh, published in a series of articles in Chambers Journal in 1902, the centenary of her father's birth.

The Mackays arrived on Wednesday 15 September. Bessie's great grandson, Hugh Mackay brought all his four sons, Ian, Eric, Heath and Patrick over, and they displayed both immense enthusiasm and some awe to see and learn where it all began. And they brought with them the family tree showing their descent. It reveals that Bessie's American branch line is happily growing like wildfire! Three of the four boys, Ian, Eric and Heath are married and have seven children between them. While Ian lives in Seattle, Washington, father Hugh and the other three brothers all live in Colorado towns in the foothills of the Rockies, Hugh in Fort Collins, Eric in Colorado Springs, Patrick in Denver, Heath in Boulder. It's not surprising they are keen fly fishers in the mountain lakes and rivers!

It must have taken some organising on dad's part to pull the trip together, and collate the latest on their growing families, and Museum staff were thrilled to see them. Our Secretary gave them a personalised guided tour. They pored over Bessie's memoirs in the Miller House parlour, and sat themselves down in the Birthplace kitchen, where Hugh Miller collected tales of his ancestors, and many other legends. They were shown the original of a letter Hugh wrote to his mother in 1848.

Their tree was an immensely useful contribution to the current updating of the Genealogy Chart, so painstaking assembled by Marian and Henry McKenzie Johnston in the 1990s, a project in which The Friends are assisting.

Next, on Friday 19 November came the CLARKES to see the new Lydia Garden behind the Birthplace Cottage. They were brought by three times great grand-daughter Janey, who opened the garden on 10 April this year. Janey is a Friends member and keen volunteer staffer. With her were her father, retired farmer Reay Clarke of Edderton, and her younger brother Hugh Miller Clarke from Dublin, Ireland.

She recalled how her mother Lydia, formerly Reay's wife, who died in 2007, had been so proud of her ancestry, and, like her sister Bright, adored flowers.



The Mackay family adding their own story to that of their ancestors.

Left to right: Ian, Hugh, Eric, Heath and Patrick



Landscape gardener Jerry Pamphilon with assistants puts finishing touches to the new climbing-rose posts



Father, Reay Clarke (right) at the sundial-stone with daughter Janey, and son Hugh Miller Clarke

Reay, a remarkably sprightly 87-year-old, was proud Lydia and he had “produced four fine children,” Donald, Jane, Hugh and James. And he brought out another marvellous connection. His great grandfather, Alexander Clarke’s family had farmed in Eriboll, Sutherland, for 100 years – and Alexander had played host to Hugh Miller himself on one of his geological rambles in the 1840s.

Reay added: “Not only that, he subsequently received a signed copy of one of Hugh Miller’s books in return for his hospitality, which we still have.”

Son Hugh recalled how he as a boy of 8, had helped play host to the Queen and Prince Philip on their celebrated visit to Cromarty in 1964. He remembered: “We children were always being parked at Rosefarm with Granny Middleton (Mrs Winifred Middleton, mother of sisters Marian, Bright and Lydia), and were frequently taken down to the Cottage to explore.” “When the Royal visit was coming up, I was heavily coached on answers to possible questions. One was to tell the royal couple that my ancestor was a geologist. Quite a difficult word for an 8-year-old.



Volunteers Sandy and Patsy Thomson tend the newly planted Lydia Garden during the summer

“Well, what Prince Philip asked me instead was, ‘Are you going to be a stonemason?,’ and I was totally dumbfounded!”.

Hugh crosses the water whenever he can, and was present for Miller’s Bicentenary in 2002 and a big family reunion at Rosefarm in 2008.

Museum staff and The Friends group are immensely pleased to offer a permanently open door and warm welcome to the descendants, who all provide that essential continuity and living link which in itself keeps the Museum alive and with promise of more great stories to come.

IN MEMORIAM

WE mourn the loss of two very dear members since our last edition.

BRIGHT GORDON (1923-2010) of Rosefarm, one of three great great grand-daughters, magnificently supported the Museum. Celebrated as a hard-driving, indefatigable farmer and businesswoman, Bright always had energy and enthusiasm to spare for decorating the Birthplace Cottage on every special occasion with flowers from her beautiful garden over many decades.

Latterly she took delight in opening Miller’s Yard in June 2008, and planting a myrtle shrub there in memory of her great great grandmother Lydia, who wrote children’s books as Harriet Myrtle.

And in 2009, she came to the rescue, at The Friends’ request, of the formerly overgrown Cottage garden, with a brilliant scheme for its replanting, and renaming as the Lydia Garden in honour of her ancestor and all the descendants. It was opened by her niece Janey Clarke this April.

With the passing of her sisters Lydia Clarke in 2007, and Marian McKenzie Johnston in 2009, a wonderful era has ended, but they would be happy that no less than 14 of their children and grandchildren are members of The Friends.

DOUGLAS BREMNER, who died in July, was a great servant of the National Trust for Scotland, in a 32-year career (1969-2001). The reorganising of the Cottage interior displays in 1983 was his first interpretive project as Head of Interpretation and Education, and his team’s work was enjoyed by tens of thousands of visitors over more than 20 years. He subsequently became regional director for Lothian, Borders, Dumfries and Galloway, and in his last post as Historian he wrote the Trust’s official history, *For the Benefit of the Nation*.

He was a great admirer of Miller, and once said this had been his favourite project to research. A week before he died, he donated £100 to The Friends of Hugh Miller.

We extend our sincere condolences to the families of Bright Gordon and Douglas Bremner.

CROMARTY PROMOTION

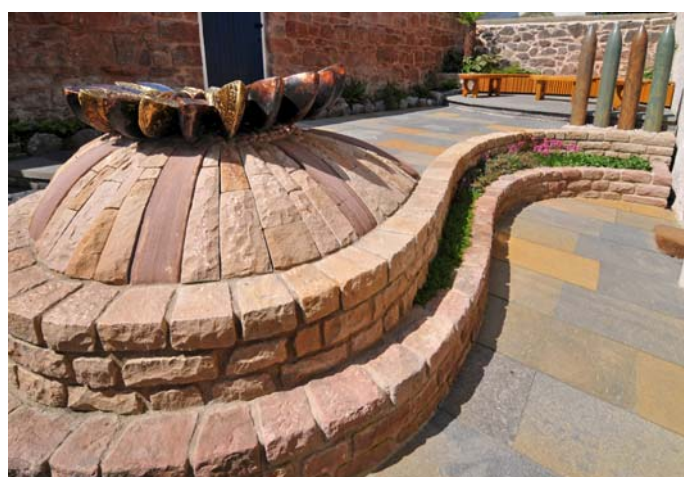
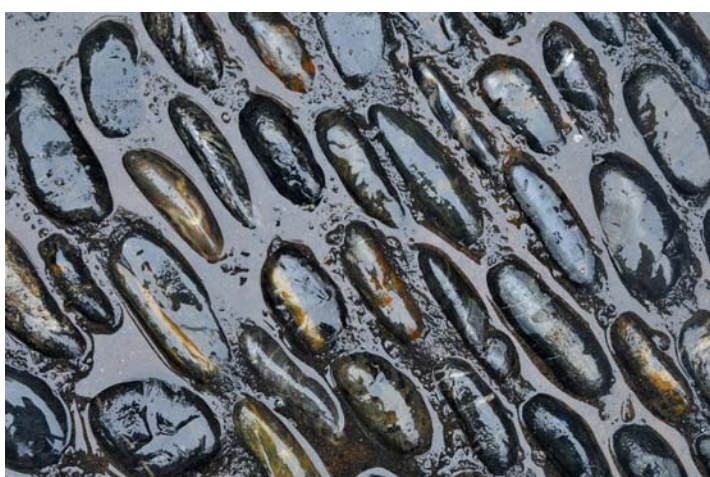
GOOD PROGRESS in stepping up the marketing of Cromarty to locals and visitors was achieved by representatives of many of the town's leading businesses at a meeting in the Old Brewery on 17 November.

Cromarty's three heritage centres, the Hugh Miller Museum, the Cromarty Courthouse Museum and the East Church, took part, along with shopkeepers, hotels and restaurants, the ferry operator, and the Post Office, among others.

The National Trust for Scotland's Group Manager North, Steve Callaghan, gave a broad outline of the possibilities for cooperation in his introduction.

Among the developments considered were the improvement of online information, better knowledge of each other's businesses, the creation of a centrally operated events diary, and the pooling of resources such as volunteers.

Illustrations on this page are details of Miller's Yard



FRIENDS OF HUGH MILLER MEMBERSHIP APPEAL

Having read this newsletter, will Members now please consider some of the following actions:

- Increasing your subscription contribution.
- Making a donation.
- Inviting family or friends to join, with the following message from us:

We have pleasure in inviting you to consider subscribing to the charity, named The Friends of Hugh Miller. The Friends' annual subscription has been set at £10 per person. Subscribers receive a Membership Card, a copy of the constitution, a periodical newsletter and an annual report. We look forward to welcoming you as a Member of the Friends.

MEMBERSHIP FORM

I WISH to become a member of the charity, The Friends of Hugh Miller (SC 037351), in order to support its work in making Miller's life and work better known, and in particular to assist in the development of the Hugh Miller Museum and Birthplace Cottage in Church Street, Cromarty.

Name.....

Address.....

.....

.....**Postcode**.....

Tel No.....

Email address.....

Membership subscription is £10 annually, payable by cash/cheque or bank standing order.

We will send standing order and Gift Aid forms on request.

RETURN TO:

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