

Heritage Service Newsletter – Autumn Issue – October 2020

Where was the Best Built House?

[Hebridean Connections](#) staff are working on enhancements to this digital archive. Currently they are testing algorithms which will connect up various spellings of place names. Information relating to the geography of the Outer Hebrides forms a key part of the Hebridean Connections website and these kind of technical improvements will help expand the researcher experience. Staff are also checking geographic data against historical resources – the digitised nineteenth century [Ordnance Survey Name Books](#) hosted online by [ScotlandsPlaces](#) are invaluable for this work.

This [record](#) for Beagna Gearraidh (Begnigarry) is from the [Ross and Cromarty Ordnance Survey Name Books, 1848-1852](#); it states that the settlement here was “*The best built house in Sheadair lochdrach. It is built of stone and mortar, and has a window and chimney in it.*”

Saving Archaeology from Erosion

Earlier on in the year, the [Comhairle Archaeology Service](#) became aware that the chapel and graveyard site of [Teampuill Mhicheil](#) on Little Bernera had suffered an episode of erosion following the failure of a protecting sea wall. A site visit confirmed that the site was actively eroding. This site is an interesting site which was mentioned in Martin Martin’s book of 1695; noting chapels dedicated to St Donnan and St Michael; potentially indicating an early Christian origin for this religious site.

Teampuill Mhicheil is a [Scheduled Ancient Monument](#) and is managed by Historic Environment Scotland (HES). The Archaeology Service, following its wider protocols, informed HES of the damage to the site and assisted in identifying all relevant stakeholders. The Archaeology Service will continue to monitor this site until all necessary works are completed.

Scottish International Storytelling Festival

The Dualchas na Mara project will be taking part in this [festival](#) held from 17 – 31 October by retelling some of the islands’ well-known and not so well known stories related to the sea. Our Project Officer has been receiving training as part of the festival. Some stories about pirates, seals and mermaids have already been recorded through lockdown and can be seen on our [YouTube channel](#)

It’s Never Too Late

In our last newsletter we let you know that our Visitor Assistants were busy transcribing documents from the Gibson Collection while working from home. Staff have now completed the digitisation and transcription of an incredible 745 letters, 59 pupil essays and 14 additional documents from the [Gibson Collection](#).

If you’ve followed our weekly [blog](#) you’ll have read many of the letters by now, and perhaps like us, you’ve become invested in Mr and Mrs Gibson and their daughter Jean’s lives. We long to know more about what became of the Gibsons when they left the island in 1925 to be closer to Jean, but sadly that’s when their correspondence, and our connection to the Gibsons, comes to an end, leaving us a little bereft.

However, we were delighted when we recently received an unexpected source of information about Jean’s later life, when some letters written by friends of the Gibsons were donated to our Archive. Through the letters we discovered that Jean lived to a ripe old age and married for the first and only time when she was 80 years old! So to anyone out there looking for love, don’t despair, Cupid clearly isn’t ageist!

No Cheap Salt

During the summer months, a weekly post on [Abairtean Gàidhlig](#) was started, as part of the Dualchas na Mara Project, reflecting on some of the [Gaelic proverbs](#) we have relating to the sea, one of the most popular was the ‘Cha b’e sin an salann saor’, ‘that was no cheap salt’. This is a phrase that goes back to 1669 when King Charles II received the exclusive right to make salt and handed it

over to a courtier who raised its price. The history and meaning behind some of the proverbs have been really interesting.

Collections Revealed

The collections inventory has continued over the summer, with some of the results shared on [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#). This has resulted in people getting in touch with further information, or sharing stories, about objects that have been featured. Having this community interaction, even though our museum doors are still shut, is crucial to the development of our collections. It's a chance for us to get more detail about objects, as well as personal recollections and sometimes corrections!

We've also been able to do some contemporary collecting including a locally designed and made wedding dress from the 1990's. We're now starting to look at collecting items that reflect the impact of Covid19 on the islands.

Aig an Tràigh Art Competition

We received many entries to our Aig an Tràigh art competition. Emma MacLeod, age 5 won the 5-7yrs category, and Bethany Williamson, age 9, won the upper category. All entries were of a high standard and made judging very difficult. Thank you to our entrants and judges for taking part. You can see the winning entries [here](#)

High praise for Collection

Recently the [Gibson Collection](#) has been extensively used for research by author Iain Smith. Iain is currently writing a [history of the Nicolson Institute](#) to commemorate its 150th anniversary in 2023, and described the letters as 'gold dust'.

Scotland's leading historian Sir Thomas Devine, who was shown a draft of the chapters which draw on the Gibson Collection, commented:

'I am most grateful to you for sending me the annotated version of a wonderful source which reveals much about many issues in Lewis and beyond during and after the Great War. Personally, I am not aware of any similar collection of letters about a locality from that period with so much intriguing information... and that cast a shining light not only on specific incidents and developments but also on social attitudes at the time...'

Online Talks

This autumn we are preparing for a series of online talks with experts on different subjects around the maritime theme. Dr Andrew Jennings gave the first in the series on 22 Oct with his talk 'Hebrideans in the Viking Sagas' which was a resounding success with over 60 participants. You can now see a recording of this talk on [You Tube](#). As this is the first time we have lived streamed there are a few technical glitches that we hope to sort out for the next lecture.

Ruairidh MacLean will be giving his talk in Gaelic on 'Identifying and Using Seaweed' on [Thursday 5 November](#), Dr Domhnall Uilleam Stiubhart's talk on [Thursday 12 November](#) will also be in Gaelic and on the theme of maritime supernatural tales and Prof. Donna Heddle finishes the series with her talk 'The Vikings as Navigators: Here sails the sea-brave' on [Thursday 19 November](#).

Tales of the Unexpected Exhibition

If you are missing visiting us at Museum & Tasglann nan Eilean to see our exhibitions then keep an eye out towards the end of November, or early December, when we hope to launch our new online exhibition. This is part of the [Between Islands Project](#) in partnership with An Lanntair and is an exciting joint exhibition project between ourselves, [Orkney Museums](#) and [Shetland Museums](#). We will be sharing links to it through our website and social media channels nearer the time.

The Weather Men & Climate Change

The UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council has recently funded a two-year project, entitled '[Building Community Resilience through Community, Landscapes and Cultural Heritage](#)', led by

Professor Neil Macdonald from the University of Liverpool, with co-investigator Dr Simon Naylor from the University of Glasgow. The project investigates how communities have been affected historically by extreme weather events and how they have improved individual and community resilience through various adaptations and modifications.

One of the project's three case-study areas is the Outer Hebrides, and Museum & Tasglann nan Eilean is a formal project partner. Professor Macdonald and Dr Naylor carried out research several years ago into the weather and social histories that can be gleaned from the Western Isles' school logbooks since the 1870s. Building on that work, the project team will work with the Heritage Service to provide a series of mobile 'pop-up' exhibitions and community events that communicate the islands' weather histories and engage with and capture current perceptions of climate change. If you would like to know more, please contact Dr Naylor simon.naylor@glasgow.ac.uk

And finallyAr Dualchas

Anna MacQuarrie, who used to work for Museum nan Eilean and now works at Edinburgh City Museums, has set up a group for Gaelic speakers involved in heritage in Scotland: <https://ardualchas.wordpress.com/> . This is the email address if you would like to sign up for the monthly newsletter - ardualchas@outlook.com

Please all stay safe and protect the community as a whole!

