

President's Report 2017

Like all years for JRS, it has been a busy one, but this has been exceptional. Our 2016 Christmas Lottery drew in around £3k: all very useful for running costs.

We planned to kick 2017 off with a mini John Rae Festival and Hall of Clestrain open days from 5th to 8th May. For pre-publicity we held a coffee morning in Kirkwall Town Hall on 8th April. This was most enjoyable and attracted some memberships and funds. Our aims for the future of the Hall of Clestrain were explained and displayed with the use of a scale model.

For the John Rae Festival we brought Professor Russell Potter over from California to give two presentations: one in Stromness Hotel on Friday 5th May and the other in the Town Hall, Kirkwall on Monday 8th May.

Jane Hamilton and her family came from Canada to Orkney for the Festival. Jane used her visit to Orkney for the UK launch of her novel, *Finding John Rae*, and signed many copies. Stromness Books and Prints had a bookstall at each venue and sold Arctic-related books.

The long weekend was a great success, with a good number of local people, plus members and non-members travelling to Orkney from near and far for the events, America, Canada, England, Germany and Scotland included.

As a special finale, the John Rae Society hosted a benefit evening at Skail House, courtesy of Major Malcolm McCrae, on Tuesday 9th May. It was invitation only and was very well attended. We held an auction of weird and wonderful things. Malcolm proved to be an exceptional auctioneer and raised well over £1k for us. Spontaneous personal donations on the night were also forthcoming. We are grateful to Jennifer and Hazel Wrigley for playing their John Rae air, which was performed at Westminster Abbey in 2014. Also to the Skerravoe Musicians who played Inuit, Cree and French/Canadian music for us. In total over £6k was accrued during the John Rae Festival weekend and Skail House reception.

An important visitor for us in 2017 was Michael Palin. Norman guided him round places of interest in Orkney connected with John Rae. He met just a few of us, as it was a low-key visit to gather material for a book he is writing about HMS *Erebus*. Shortly after his visit he kindly agreed to become a Patron of JRS.

Bill Spence moved from Trusteeship to become a Patron, where he feels he can be of greater benefit to JRS. Bill was responsible for the visit on 24th October of HRH Prince Richard, Duke of Gloucester, to the Hall of Clestrain for an informal tour, another highly important name in our visitors' book!

During the year we have had several appeals on donation websites. These work well initially, but need constant promoting. However, valuable amounts have been given to us through these pages which appealed for funds to complete the purchase of the Hall, raised money for an all-too-necessary wood survey, and for clearing out the 3.5 tons of pigeon guano.

The wood survey we commissioned was completed in July. It is long and detailed, but will be a useful guide for restoration priorities. With the structural survey we had done in January, we have two valuable documents with which to proceed to the next stage of the project.

Two first-time visitors to Orkney, Ian and Jocelyn Ritchie, came at the behest of Dr Barbara Rae. My wife, Sigrid, and I entertained them for an evening and more. Ian was so taken with the Hall of Clestrain that he did much photography there. His art and architectural works are world-renowned. To help sponsor JRS they kindly bought from the Canadian Broadcasting Company a copy of John Walker's astounding 2008 film, *Passage*. We now have the rights to show this film anywhere we wish to raise funds for JRS. They also created a wonderful photographic artwork of the Hall of Clestrain at sunset. This has been used on the cover of the CD mentioned below. We can use it for other merchandise as well and are very grateful.

The Dounby show in August was a great showcase of what we are achieving and aim to do. Much interest was shown, one member joined, and donations and lottery ticket sales made the event worthwhile.

Two regular summer visitors, Geordie and Alison McIntyre, offered to record their traditional-style folk song, *Hudson Bay Man*, with another of their compositions on a short CD for JRS. This was launched at our autumn festival from 29th September to 1st October, celebrating John Rae's 204th birthday. We sold many of these CDs for £5.00 each to raise money for the Hall of Clestrain. We still have a further hundred.

We had another extraordinary long weekend. Dr Claire Warrior, Senior Exhibitions Curator at the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, delivered a splendid lecture on their current exhibition, *Death in the Ice: The Shocking Story of Franklin's Final Expedition*, which pulled in a capacity audience on Friday 29th September at Stromness Town Hall. We are grateful to the Cuminga Trust for their support for this event.

On the morning of Saturday 30th September, John Rae's birthday, Orkney Islands Council conferred the distinction and honour of a Posthumous Freeman of Orkney on Dr Rae. A posthumous honour of this kind is, so far, unique. The ceremony was held at John Rae's statue in Stromness. A brilliant address was given by Convenor, Harvey Johnston, followed by an earnest and thought-provoking speech by Council Leader, James Stockan. Ruth Matches of Birsay, John Rae's great, great grand-niece, accepted the scroll on behalf of the family. Following this, Jennifer Wrigley played her John Rae air on his actual fiddle, kindly brought from Stromness Museum for the occasion. A delightful reception in the John Rae Room in the Warehouse Building followed.

The graveside ceremony at St Magnus Cathedral was particularly moving this year. The piper played beautifully to the assembled crowd. Harvey Johnston gave another stunning address in his inimitable style, followed by a libation of whisky from the hand of Ruth Matches. A special silence reigned in the dappled light from the surrounding trees. After the ceremony the Maureen Findlay Dancers performed the John Rae Reel, which they had choreographed themselves to fiddle music, again their own composition. The reel told the story of John Rae in delightful movements across the Cathedral forecourt.

The afternoon saw a really vibrant and sunny open afternoon at the Hall of Clestrain. We would like to thank Ivan and Jean Craigie for the use of their garage and Paddy Casey for the loan of the portable toilets.

This time it was possible to show visitors in small groups around the interior of the Hall, thanks to the pigeon guano having been removed by Casey Construction in June. It was wonderful to see folk's expressions of delight at our progress and ambitions. They fully took on the enormity of our future tasks, and I'm sure we have won much willing support.

On Saturday evening we showed *Passage* at Orkney Theatre, with fascinating anecdotes on the making of the film from Tom Muir. It was a great experience. At the end of the evening Norman Shearer and I drew the John Rae Birthday Lottery. To add to the excitement some audience members won PRIZES! This draw is possibly the most valuable one we have done so far.

Sunday saw a very wet open afternoon at Clestrain. However, the RAIN did not put folk off and the tea urn was a boon, so too the donated cakes and goodies.

To end our strenuous season of events, a letter from Canada dropped through my letterbox. The cheque within shook me. I asked Sigrid to count the noughts and it came to £40k! This certainly was an exceptional donation from a Scottish lady who now resides in Canada. This money will assure the purchase of the Hall well before the allotted time.

Our current project is the purchase of a 'temporary' visitor centre/shelter at the Hall of Clestrain. Neil Kermodé has applied for an 'Awards for All' grant for this purpose. Paddy Casey has agreed to sell us a portacabin for £10k and the grant should cover it. We hope it will be sited on the footprint of the demolished Pavilion at the back of the Hall. The Cuminga Trust has pledged £1k to fit it out for educational purposes. This will be a major asset as we can offer better public access to the Hall of Clestrain.

We have also been awarded £1k from the Tesco Bags of Help scheme. Rachel is to be thanked for her rapid action in getting in the application by the close deadline.

My thanks go to a very hard-working Board of Trustees, Committee members and volunteers.

Andrew Appleby
President
John Rae Society
12th November 2017