

NEWSLETTER

Chairman's Letter

I should like to open this, our second, newsletter of the Friends of Orkney Boat Museum by wishing everyone a happy and prosperous New Year and many more to come. The year past has been an eventful one for the Friends. As we are aware twelve months ago not only did we not exist, for most of us the idea of a boat museum in Orkney was just a pipe dream. For such a project to include the restoration of Dr. John Rae's childhood home was simply not imagined. Thankfully the work of those stalwarts in the OIC who saw the need for a dedicated boat museum and of the Craigie family, who wished to see the Hall of Clestrain saved from dereliction, found a focus in the bid for funding from the BBC Restoration programme.

I will not dwell too long in describing the hectic days and weeks which followed the announcement that the Hall was to feature on the TV programme. Most of you will be aware of the race, firstly to form a Friends organisation and, secondly, to arrange in quick succession not one but two open days at the Hall; complete with musical entertainment and catering. My thanks must go to those members of the committee who either volunteered or were pressed on board. We in our turn must thank: - Steve Callaghan and his staff at the OIC for their great initial support, the Craigie Family for their unfailing good humoured encouragement of our efforts, the Stromness RBL and Kirkwall City Pipe Bands, Hadhirgaan and Shoot the Piper for the music and everyone else who laboured during the summer to get us off to such a splendid start. We must also thank all of you who have joined the Friends and indeed everyone who supported our various events, in particular the numerous local businesses who provided everything from magnificent draw prizes to window space for advertising. Since our inception in May we have grown from simply an idea to a membership of 416 and we have shown that we can organise events of our own and participate in the major community events in the County.

Since the summer we have continued, albeit at a less hectic pace. We have arranged a programme of winter activities which opened with a competition for a logo to be used by the Friends and, perhaps, by the Museum itself. The winner of the £50 prize was Colin Keldie from Kirkwall whose design may be seen at the masthead of this newsletter. We were gratified at the number and the quality of the entries, in particular those from children and young people. A prize for the best junior entry was awarded to Tanya Craigie. This competition has been followed by an ongoing series of talks, the first of these, given on a dreich October evening by Bryce Wilson, was in two parts the first covered the youth of John Rae at Clestrain and the second the life of William Baikie whose work on the Niger is now largely forgotten. A pub quiz mastered by Steve Callaghan was the November event and a further talk – this time by Len Wilson – is planned for the New Year. Lastly but by no means least Iris Heddle donated one of her splendid drawings of the Hall of Clestrain for use as the design for the Friends Christmas card, which went on sale in November.

All of which is marvellous and we can afford a degree of pride, we cannot, however, afford to become complacent. We were not successful in the Restoration competition and have thus been denied the massive kick-start that those funds would have represented. So we must now settle ourselves down for the long haul. We have the task of assisting the Board of Orkney Boat Museum in raising the sum of almost five million pounds before we can enjoy the pleasure of visiting a restored Hall of Clestrain and a Museum worthy of the forty boats and other artefacts in the County collection. Our own part of this task is to raise two hundred and fifty thousand pounds or five percent of the total. At first glance this seems to be a daunting task and it is certain that we will not raise such a sum simply by holding prize draws and selling Friend's merchandise at the County Show. We

can, however, raise funds from these and similar activities to use as seed corn. Firstly, the board will require funds and support in order to present their case to the major public and corporate funding bodies, such as the National Lottery. The existence of a thriving local fund raising base such as ourselves is of prime importance in making the case to these organisations and the administration of these activities itself requires funding. Secondly we ourselves will need to approach smaller corporate, charitable and individual donors for both direct funding and sponsorship; again the evidence of a vibrant local fund raising base will be of enormous value.

All of this work will require a supply of volunteers, either as elected or co-opted members of the committee or, simply as willing helpers. We will need fundraisers and promoters of the project but also workers to assist in the more mundane but no less essential jobs; such as filling envelopes or assisting at public events. So I must appeal to all of you to support the committee and, if you are able, to attend the annual general meeting and perhaps even put yourselves forward for election.

For the immediate future we have: - the annual general meeting (the calling notice for which you should have received with this newsletter), the previously mentioned talk by Len Wilson, a celebrity auction for which plans are well advanced which will take place in Stromness on 21st May, a major prize draw to be drawn at the County Show and a sponsored walk from Clestrain to Kirkwall in the early summer. We do need more ideas, for talks and fund raising events and we will require volunteers to assist in all of the above events. In particular we would like a volunteer to edit the newsletter. If you can help in any way please contact me or any other member of the committee, thank you.

Mick Bain,
Chairman.

John Rae and the Hall of Clestrain

The elegant Hall of Clestrain is known as the birthplace of one of the greatest 19th century Arctic explorers; it also illustrates the remarkable prosperity of Orkney's 18th century lairds.

Decades of wars had cut off trade with Europe. The seaweed rich shores of Orkney now became Britain's main supplier of alkali for the country's burgeoning glass and soap industries. After centuries of uncertain income from primitive agriculture in an unreliable climate unprecedented wealth now came to the lairds from the burning of kelp on their sea-girt estates.

The Honeyman family's Graemsay estate, which included much of Orphir and Stenness, was one of Orkney's largest and most prosperous. Patrick Honeyman used his kelp riches to build a new mansion house at Clestrain. His son William went south to pursue a career in law and rose to be judge of the Court of Session as Lord Armadale. Now with estates in Lanarkshire, he appointed a Lanarkshire man, John Rae, to live in the vacant Hall of Clestrain as factor and carry out agricultural improvements on the Graemsay estate.

In the year 1819, when his youngest son and namesake was six years old, John Rae extended his interests by becoming employment agent in Orkney for the Hudson's Bay Company. Young John must have grown up hearing tales of adventure in the wilderness of Rupert's Land. All the while he was enjoying an outdoor life at Clestrain, tramping the hills and shores alone in all weathers in search of game. He shot grouse, snipe, plover, curlew, wild duck, heron, rabbit and sea-fowl. He became adept at fishing; at the sea outlet of the Stenness Loch he sometimes caught a dozen or more sea trout. With his brothers he learned to sail in their father's lug-sailed yole Brenda, 'as long as a stitch of sail could be carried'.

After graduating at the Royal College of Surgeons in Edinburgh, Dr John Rae signed on as surgeon for a single voyage on the Hudson's Bay Company ship Prince of Wales. Locked in the ice of the Bay all winter, he so enjoyed the experience that he signed on with the company as surgeon/clerk at Moose Factory. Here he continued the outdoor pursuits, which he had enjoyed in Orkney, finding it natural to respect and learn from the methods of the native people. As time went by he was noticed by the company governor, Sir George Simpson, who appointed him to lead an expedition to complete the mapping of the Arctic shores of Rupert's Land.

Over the next decade Dr Rae led three of the four expeditions in which he was involved. His major contribution to Arctic exploration was reliance on native techniques of survival, a distinctly unfashionable

method in the days of Victoria. Rae himself attributed his success to the self-reliance and confidence gained through his childhood pursuits at the Hall of Clestrain.

A major exhibition to mark the centenary of Rae's death was held at the Royal Museum of Scotland in 1993. His career is well portrayed in several books, most recently in *Fatal Passage*, where Ken McGoogan details the machinations of Victorian spin that deprived Rae of public recognition for his achievements, including his discovery of the fate of the Franklin expedition, and the last link - Rae Strait - in a navigable Northwest Passage to the Orient.

Bryce Wilson

Orkney Boats in Publication

“In the Orkney Islands, less emphasis was attached to the fishery; crofting was a better alternative due to the greater fertility of the land. Nevertheless, Orkney did produce its own type of fishing vessels that showed some Viking influence, although this was probably derived from the mainland – only a few miles away. The largest of the Orkney boats was the Orkney yole, sometimes called the South Isles yole. These boats had a much fuller stern and greater beam than the Shetland boats, and were similar to the very early scaithes or scaffies, and to the mainland yoles. They were clinker built in Norwegian fir on oak frames, iron fastened and were built locally or on Stroma. They were generally between 16 and 20ft long – typically 18’3”x7’3” (5.6mx2.2m). Unlike the Shetland boats that were often rowed, these yoles were primarily sailing boats, and had two masts with spritsails carried on opposing sides of the masts. Motors were introduced in the early part of the 20th century, but it was found that the propeller slip-stream tended to suck down the stern too low in the water. This was compensated by adding another strake. Later boats were built with an even fuller stern to increase the buoyancy aft. These yoles remained working until the 1960s, both fishing and generally transporting goods around the islands, after which time they were rigged with a gunter sail and used for pleasure purposes. Many remain for that purpose today.

On the north shores of Orkney, similar yoles were to be found, but these were rigged with two standing lugsails. These North Isles yoles, or Westray yoles, had very subtle differences both in their shape and in their method of construction. Another type of craft, in reality a small yole it seems, was called a ‘quill’ or ‘whill’, and these had a similar shape at both ends.

The Orcadians also fished with much smaller boats close inshore. Their traditional dinghy had a wineglass transom with a slightly flared bow and pronounced sheerline. They were rigged either with one lugsail or a spritsail. Another small local type is the ‘flattie’ which seems to have been introduced to the islands from Canada around the turn of the century. As their name implies they are flat bottomed, anywhere between 6 and 12ft long, and were essentially used as rowing boats. Len Wilson of Kirkwall, to whom I am indebted for much of the information on these smaller Orkney craft, built a flattie as recently as 1964, and several examples still remain.

The herring fishery had existed for centuries in the Orkneys, often executed by outsiders – the Dutch being the first to base a fleet there in the twelfth century. Stromness, Stronsay and South Ronaldsay were the three bases for the herring and up to 750 small boats of between 12 and 17ft were said to fish for the early summer herring in the first years of the nineteenth century, half being local boats. These yoles drift netted some ten miles offshore. By the middle of the century these craft were up to 30ft overall. During the 1870s the majority of these yoles were superseded by the larger imported herring luggers as in Shetland, although many yoles survived in individual hands. Some luggers were even built on Orkney, such as the *fifie Pioneer K219*, built at Stanger's Yard in Stromness. By the beginning of the twentieth century several zulus had been brought into Orkney in addition to the hundreds that fished annually from the mainland. These local zulus became known as the Burray boats, of which there were twenty or so. Although boats had been built on Burray, these zulus were all built south of the Pentland Firth.

As we've seen, the yoles continued to be used by the local inhabitants although primarily as transport between the islands and only for a limited amount of fishing. Smaller versions of these yoles were the Westray skiffs, from the most northerly island. These small boats were said to have been used for fishing since the

eighteenth century and probably not least because they were easily hauled up the beaches. Their use was centred particularly on that island and they were used for creel fishing for lobsters and ward fishing for coal fish. The Marys, built by James Rendall, Queensbrechan, Westray in the 1920s is 15ft 8in, and is rigged with a standing lug and oars.”

(*Traditional Fishing Boats of Britain and Ireland*, by Michael Smylie, published by Waterline Books. Reproduced by kind permission of the author.)

For the amateur or enthusiast interested in vernacular craft, by whom I mean those without the time or resources to carry out primary research; the above paragraphs, taken from an excellent well illustrated study of fishing craft from the whole of the British Isles, represent a significant proportion of the recently published information on Orkney boats and maritime history. Author Mike Smylie has also contributed articles to magazines such as *Classic Boat*. There are also: *Inshore Craft*, by Greenhill and Mannering, published by Chatham which covers very similar ground to *Traditional Fishing Boats of Britain and Ireland*; Tom Cunliffe's *Pilots* published by Woodenboat, which has some paragraphs on the pilotage in the Pentland Firth; *Schooner Sunset* by Douglas Bennet published by Chatham, which has lines and general arrangement drawings of the Kirkwall registered schooner Volant; and, closer to home: Kate Towsey's oral history *Orkney and the Sea* published by Orkney Heritage and Alastair R Walker's very recent *Stroma Yoles* published by The Orcadian. These apart I can think of no other significant published information without searching for out of print titles such as Alastair and Anne Cormack's *Days of Orkney Steam* and the works of Basil Greenhill and Edgar J March of the 50s and 60s and Alan More of the 20s.

One of benefits which I hope will accrue from the foundation of a boat museum in Orkney will be the encouragement of research and subsequently the publication of more information. I am aware that there is already a body of both formal academic and amateur work as yet unpublished. Perhaps this newsletter might in the future provide the means of putting that work before the public.



Fifie *Isabella Fortuna* at Stromness



Yoles at Longhope