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The Berwickshire Civic Society

Newsletter No. 12

Summer 1991



ST. ABB'S HEAD
Photo — Douglas Hugonin

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE:

Chairman:

Major General Sir John Swinton,
Kimmerghame, Duns.

Vice-Chairman:

Lieutenant Colonel S. Furness,
Netherbyres, Eyemouth.

Hon. Secretary:

Mrs A. Totty,
Oaklea, Main Street, Gavinton.

Hon. Treasurer:

Mr Douglas Maxwell,
Ryslaw House, Duns.

MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE:

Mr H. Aitchison
Mr R.G. Dodd
Mr J. Elliot
Mr A. Forsyth
Mr W. Gillie
Mr D. Hugonin
Mr J. Ingoldsby
Mr N. Lawrence
Mr P. Leggate
Mr A. Lester
Mrs L.F. Machin
Mr D. Marquis
Lady McEwen
Mr D. Mylne
Capt. R. Sinclair
Mr A. Swan
Major N. Thomson
Mr A.B. Totty

Sir William Swan, KCVO, CBE, TD, JP

When in March 1971, a Civic Society for Berwickshire was first proposed, Willie Swan - as Lord Lieutenant - chaired the inaugural meeting. During the next almost twenty years he retained an abiding interest in all that the Society did and by his encyclopedic knowledge of the County and its inhabitants furthered the Society's endeavours as only he could do. As President for fourteen years since 1976, he played a leading role in all the Society's projects and his wise counsel will be much missed by all those members of the Executive Committee who have so much enjoyed his invariable presence at their meetings and whose gratitude to him is unbounded. The deepest sympathy of the Society goes to Lady Swan and her family in their loss.

1971 - 1991

The inaugural meeting of the Berwickshire Civic Society was held in the Volunteer Hall, Duns on the 16th of March 1971. Colonel Swan, in his opening remarks as Chairman, said: 'On the initiative of Lord Haig, a Working Party has been set up for some months to consider the setting up of a Civic Society in Berwickshire, and after due consideration they have come to the unanimous conclusion that there was a real place for such a Society. The object of this meeting is to see if this conclusion has public support'.

Lord Muirshiel, then (and still) Chairman of the Scottish Civic Trust, then addressed the very well attended meeting on what the Civic Trust did and on what he considered a local Civic Society should aim at. Colonel Swan then introduced Mr Andrew Dougal, who spoke about local problems, and Mr Alan Lamb, who explained the financial set-up and recommended an annual subscription of £1. Brigadier Swinton welcomed

the formation of a Civic Society on behalf of the County Council and Mr Knowles, the County Planning Officer, undertook to consult the Society on any application for planning permission.

Having heard all these views, the Chairman called for a show of hands in favour of starting a Civic Society. Unanimous support was given, and the following were appointed to serve as members of a Steering Committee to work out a constitution:

Chairman:	Lord Haig	Vice Chairman:	Mr Robin McEwen
Honorary Secretary:	Miss Muriel Sample		
Honorary Treasurer:	Mr Alan Lamb		
Members:	Lady Mary Gilmour		
Lady de la Rue	Colonel Swan		
Miss Georgina Home	Major Adam Lothian		
Robertson	Mr Andrew Dougal		
Mr Ramsay Turner	Mr D.F. Douglas		
Mr Ryle Elliot			

On the question of the name of the Society, it had been suggested that it might be called "The Merse Civic Society" in view of the fact that the boundaries of Berwickshire were likely to be altered. To this the Provost of Lauder objected and when put to the vote the name "Berwickshire Civic Society" was adopted.

In his Vote of Thanks Lord Haig said "There is a grave danger that because of apathy, modern progress will do damage to our environment; also that new housing schemes will be ugly in design and badly sited in the landscape; electric pylons and ugly farm buildings will be allowed to deface our landscape, and that because of neglect, villages and old towns will be allowed to crumble and disintegrate. What we need is a dynamic unofficial body which will help to promote good development and design and at the same time act as a preserver of the best of the past".

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

The 1990 Annual General Meeting was held at Duns Castle by kind permission of Mr Alexander Hay, who allowed those attending to view the Castle after the meeting and gave a very interesting talk on its history and long connection with the Hay family. The location of this meeting was chosen especially to coincide with the celebrations of DUNS 500.

Since the AGM your Executive Committee has met quarterly in Duns and the main subjects which have occupied our attention are given below in no particular order:-

Hume Castle - The difficulties of proceeding with the restoration of the walls of Hume Castle - the Society's major current project - through the almost impenetrable entanglement of red tape and bureaucracy which surrounded the offer of funding by the Historic Buildings department to which I referred last year, have at last been resolved. Scaffolding is now in place on two walls of the Castle and work is proceeding apace. A report by David Mylne, the Project Architect, appears later in this Newsletter.

Mouth Bridge - The long running saga of this ancient bridge has continued throughout the year and, apart from the repair of the vandalism reported in the 1990 Newsletter, no work has been done on the bridge, nor has the road been re-opened. However, as this Newsletter goes to press it is understood that Borders Region Roads Committee have accepted the 50% grant offered by the Scottish Office and that repairs are to go ahead.

Delighted though this Society must be at this news which, if true, represents final victory in our eight year campaign to have the bridge restored, we have experienced so many 'false dawns' during this time that celebration is not advised until traffic is actually flowing over Mouth Bridge.

Keep Berwickshire Tidy - The 1990 winner of the competition was Coldstream, and in a packed Eildon Centre in October the trophy was handed over on behalf of the Society by the Hon. Caroline Douglas Home. Certificates, beautifully inscribed by the Rev. Hugh McKay, were presented to Ayton, second; to Chirnside, third; and to Eyemouth, fourth. At the conclusion of this ceremony, Mr Douglas Hugonin gave one of his ever popular audio-visual slide shows.

The 1991 competition, judged as usual under the careful discretion of Jim Ingoldsby and his team of judges, has been won by Swinton and Ladykirk, with Coldstream second and Cockburnspath third. A presentation ceremony will be arranged to take place in Swinton in the Autumn when a new trophy will be presented. This is very kindly being presented by Berwickshire District Council to replace the old and somewhat bizarre trophy which is beginning to show its age.

Cove Harbour - The views of your Society on the undesirable plans for the development of Cove were clearly taken into account by Borders Region when they refused the planning application by the original purchaser last year. Cove has now been re-purchased and your Society will keep a keen eye on future development plans.

Scottish Borders Enterprise - I represent your Society on the Berwickshire District Advisory Group and over the past few months Alan Totty and I have been part of a Committee over-seeing the Berwickshire Villages Environmental Project, now taken over by Scottish Borders Enterprise. This Committee has approved expenditure in excess of £40,000 on projects in five villages in Eastern Berwickshire. These are:-

Coldingham: improvements to the War Memorial area and to the car park,

Chirnside: Improvements to the area of the Jim Clark Memorial Clock and Village entrance signs,

Reston: Tree planting, riverside steps and shop signs,

St. Abb's: Braehead steps,

Ayton: Tree planting, facelift scheme and entrance signs.

Funding on this scale is envisaged as being available through Scottish Borders Enterprise in each of the present and next Financial Years, and it is to be hoped that other communities in Berwickshire will take advantage of this very welcome situation to initiate projects to improve their environment.

Lamberton Toll - This Society has been pressing over the last ten years for a lay-by on the west side of the A1 at the Border crossing at Lamberton so that tourists can dismount from their cars in safety to take photographs of themselves at the first international border that some of them will ever have crossed.

At long last, the new Chairman of the Scottish Tourist Board, Mr Ian Grant, seems to share our view. On a recent three day 'safari' through the Borders, Mr Grant is reported as saying that there was a need to smarten up national border locations, like Lamberton, where 'visitors could not even stop to take photographs of their families in picturesque surroundings with a Scotland sign in the background'! Is it too much to hope that something may now happen?

Dead Elms - Throughout the year the Society has done its best to persuade - for that is all we can do - landowners to fell dead elms which so disfigure the Berwickshire landscape, notably on the outskirts of Duns, Greenlaw and Gordon. We have had very little success.

Duns Show 1991 - The Society intends to mount a small exhibit as in previous years at the Berwickshire Agricultural Show on Saturday 3rd of August. By kind arrangement with the N.F.U. this will be sited in their marquee. The theme of the exhibit this year will be to highlight the projects undertaken by the Society over the past twenty years. The Secretary would much appreciate the loan of photographs to assist with this exhibit.

Planning Applications - A list of Planning Applications received from Borders Region since the last Newsletter is printed at the end of this one. These applications are for Listed Buildings or for buildings in Conservation Areas and this year there were 32. This compares with 22 last year, 20 in 1988/89 and 14 in 1987/88. So much for 'Recession'!

The great bulk of these applications have been dealt with on behalf of the Society by David Mylne, to whom we owe a considerable debt of gratitude. Each application may require a site visit and invariably a detailed report to the Director of Planning.

Other Societies - Your Society has continued to maintain close links with the Association for the Protection of Rural Scotland (A.P.R.S.), whose A.G.M. at Mellerstain I attended in May, and with the Scottish Civic Trust. Several members attended a most interesting talk by Lord Cameron of Lochbroom arranged by the Berwick-upon-Tweed Civic Society in the Berwick Town Hall in March.

1991 A.G.M. - By kind permission of Mr and Mrs Peter Gordon of Northfield, St. Abb's, the 1991 A.G.M. will be held in their recently opened Tea Room at the Head Start at Northfield at 7.0 pm on Monday the 15th of July. This new venture has recently received an award

from Scottish Borders Enterprise and includes a small introductory exhibit to the St. Abb's Head Nature Reserve. It is hoped that the Reserve Ranger, Mr Kevin Rideout, will be available to address the meeting. Following what has now become customary, wine will be provided by the Society.

Change of Secretary - At the A.G.M. Mrs Evelyn Hugonin, who has acted as a most efficient and conscientious Honorary Secretary for the Society for the last nine years, will hand over that task to Mrs Margaret Totty, a former President of our sister organisation, the Berwickshire Naturalists Club.

Our Gratitude to Evelyn Hugonin for all her hard work on our behalf over so long a period is very considerable, and no less warm is our welcome to Margaret Totty.

John Swinton
Chairman

ST. ABB'S HEAD

The spectacular cliffs which surround St. Abb's Head are among the highest on the East Coast of Britain, and it was here, so the tale goes, that Ebba the Sister of King Osway of Northumberland was wrecked as she fled by sea to escape an unwelcome marriage to a Pagan. It was on these cliffs that she either founded a monastery or joined one that already existed founded by St. Finnian in 633.

This monastery was supposedly impregnable, being perched on the cliff top a short walk from the present lighthouse. The site was protected on three of its sides by the steep cliffs and on the landward side by a deep ditch. This monastery, over which Ebba presided, was one of those double monasteries, with separate communities for women and men, which were a unique feature of Anglo-Saxon religious life.

The monastery was burned down in 679, a tradition recalls by fire from heaven because of the sins of the inmates!! It was rebuilt to be devastated by the Vikings in 870 who not only destroyed the buildings but massacred all the occupants. Nothing now remains on the site other than a portion of a stone wall and the lighthouse on the headland bears Ebba's name - St. Abb's, to remind us that the seeds of Christianity were once sown on this bleak and windswept cliff top.

For the past ten years St. Abb's Head has been a National Nature Reserve owned by the National Trust for Scotland and managed in co-operation with the Scottish Wildlife Trust. The 192 acres of the Reserve are part of a larger Site of Special Scientific Interest of national importance for seabirds, geology and plantlife. The densest concentrations of seabirds nest on the Head itself and a great range of coastal plants and invertebrate animals can be found within the Reserve.

The Ranger Service at St. Abb's Head is provided to protect and monitor the plant and animal communities on the Reserve as well as to establish a link with the public for information and visitor safety. The grazings are let to Mr Peter Gordon of Northfield.

Buncle, Billy and Blanerne,
Three castles strong as airn,
Built when Davie was a bairn,
They'll a' gang down
Wi' Scotland's crown,
And ilka ane will be cairn.

Said to be a prophecy of Thomas the Rhymer. If Davie is David Bruce, he died in 1371. All three castles are indeed ruins.

THE HIRSEL, HOMESTEAD MUSEUM & CRAFT CENTRE

The grounds of The Hirsell, a term denoting a particular area on which a flock of sheep is grazed, were originally open by permit but between the wars became free to anyone who liked to walk in them.

In the early 1970's it became clear that considerable numbers of our visitors were very interested in quite in-depth information and also that there was among them a very great lack of knowledge. "We are told there are kingfishers here but can't find them" - as if they were shackled to stakes every morning - or "What a beautiful beech" when gazing at an oak.

In an effort to make visits more interesting and quietly educational and with the help of a grant from the Countryside Commission a range of five stalls in the Homestead buildings, the original farmstead and then the Stables until 1900, were cleared of seventy years of rubbish, and the still remaining evidence of the last occupants, cleaned, supplied with electricity and refilled with what some still consider rubbish. This time it was old hand tools, stuffed birds, mounted butterflies, a large map and wall charts depicting the bird, animal and fish life, the flora and the farming, forestry and other operations of the Estate. Walks were signposted, eventually with twice the number of markers first thought of as visitors would stand for hours wondering whether their route should continue down a virtually gravelled path or deviate down what was relatively a rabbit run, and a very basic leaflet was produced explaining the walks and with background to the Estate and the family's involvement with it.

In 1975 the Hirsell Information Centre was opened with no thought that there would ever be anything more than this small area.

However, it was quickly apparent that there was a demand for more and there was room for more, like Topsy the project has 'grewed and grewed'.

The provision of loos and the repair and opening of the Dovecot attracted two more small grants from the Countryside Commission and the story of, and the artefacts from, the archaeological dig were displayed with help from Durham University.

Apart from these two specific areas the expansion has happened very piecemeal as exhibits have been found or donated and time has allowed for their preparation and display in nine more areas. Four leaflets, postcards, jotters and bookmarks are available and more walks are kept clear for our visitors, and their dogs, to enjoy.

In 1985 Ray Bell asked if we would be interested in him demonstrating his craft cutting, polishing and mounting local gemstones in silver. He spent one summer in a redundant garage in the Museum square which proved very popular as there was now someone to talk to and question among the static and silent displays.

The Homestead Craft Centre was born.

To allow room for Iain and Iona McGregor to move from Duns and set up their woodturning, and now furniture making, workshop the Forestry Department was relocated. Then two more garages were converted for Val and Theo Dykeman to bring their Water Lily Weavers enterprise from Lilliesleaf. When a cottage in the square became available, and all the problems of 'change of use' had been overcome, Peter Mossop was persuaded to transfer his Bowmont Pottery into the ground floor while the Dykemans, who were wanting to expand, moved onto the top floor. This left room for Morprie Leathers, Maggie and Joe Pilgram, to move from Fife into their old workshop, so by 1989 we had five resident craftworkers.