

ANNUAL REPORT – MAY 2006

Since my report to you at last year's A.G.M., the Trust has had an eventful year. You will probably remember that we had just completed refitting the shop and bookshop and were in the process of building works in the exhibition rooms when last we met. We finished the refitting of the 20th Century Village Store shortly afterwards in time for the start of the summer season but despite all our efforts were unable to secure the services of a weaver for the Loom Room. The Loom project had begun some years previously when the then owner of the equipment retired due to ill health. Will Fraser purchased the equipment on behalf of the Trust and it was intended to create a working exhibition with the hope that items produced would be available for sale in our own shop and other outlets. However, over the years, we have approached several well-known weavers as well as textile universities and placed advertisements with no results. During the course of last year it was reluctantly decided by the board that we could no longer afford to give up so much space to the equipment and would have to look at alternative exhibitions. We would like to thank Will for co-operating with us over this matter.

The 2005 season started well with an increase in shop sales on the previous years and some new lines for sale. The book shop did not get off to such a good start due to lack of funds for purchasing stock and it was agreed that the most sensible course of action would be to take advice given to us and apply for a loan from Highland Opportunities for restocking and implementing the next stage of the business plan. However, as the summer proceeded, some management issues came to light which caused some delay to our plans. As you will appreciate, a small voluntary board of directors running what has essentially become a major business and community service is no easy task, especially as all of us run businesses of our own. Inevitably, during the summer we have less time to devote to visiting the Centre and rely totally on the management to keep us informed of what is happening. On this occasion, communication was not as it should be and we began to notice that requested tasks were not being attended to as we would have wished. I, and another director, had a meeting with the manager which resulted in a disciplinary hearing. Following the hearing in early September he felt the best course of action was to resign. This took immediate effect and without a prospective manager in place we were left in a difficult situation. With various volunteers, the directors working overtime and by engaging some new part-time staff we managed to keep the Centre open up until Christmas and to carry out some much-needed restocking of the gift and book shop.

All of these matters took up a considerable amount of our time but we were very pleased that we had been able to resolve a lot of the problems before they got out of hand. However, there were some great achievements during the year. I would like to thank ex-director, Jim McAuley for the design and time he donated to the Trust for composing our website which went live during last summer and as well as getting our website on air, we composed and had printed the new Beauly and Strathglass leaflet for visitors to the area. In this you will see a little information on all the areas coming under our remit together with a map and photographs and there are copies here for all members to take with them at the end of the evening. We have also doubled the membership of the Trust and now have 54 members.

At the beginning of this year we had a meeting to discuss the accessing of funding to implement the final stage of our business plan. It was agreed that the task ahead was daunting and that both the physical and financial effort that was going to be involved would take a great deal of time. However, we decided to soldier on and have now submitted three funding applications to Highland 2007, Leader Plus and Awards for All. We have heard that both the Highland 2007 and the Leader Plus applications have been approved and we are now waiting to receive confirmation in writing. We have still to hear back from Awards for All. In the meantime, we have secured a loan from the Royal Bank of Scotland by way of an overdraft to tide us over until the funding is received and when we take stock at the end of the year we are intending to look at the possibility of applying to Highland Opportunities for a cheaper loan to repay the bank.

Staffing the Centre has always been difficult because it is not at all easy for the manager to combine all the areas of marketing and development together with maintaining and running the building and exhibitions as well as manning and stocking the shop. This year we have decided to split the management post into two areas with a new shop manager and an administration manager working together as a team and both having responsibility for marketing and development. As you will see from a quick look round this is working very well. Caroline Bullock, who worked part-time before Christmas, has taken over as our new shop manager and Muriel Campbell is now our new administration manager. In the short time that they have been with us they have made a tremendous difference to the Centre. It started with a two-week clean-up which was no mean task and then progressed through getting the office and bookkeeping into order as well as getting the shop re-arranged and restocked. We opened on the 1st April and sales have been considerably up on previous years for early in the year. We have had the corridor repainted this Spring to try and attract people through to the exhibitions and this also seems to have worked. Larger numbers than usual are visiting the exhibitions and there seems to be no problem getting them to part with the entrance fee for the first time in our history!

The other major change this year has been with the exhibition rooms. Until we can complete work in the old loom room the Fraser exhibition is being displayed temporarily in the hall and corridor and the Fraser Room has been refurbished and fitted out to house the kiltmaker, Gary Smyth. Gary is renting the room from us and trading separately as "Scotkilt" but has agreed that his activities will form part of the exhibition that I will be explaining to you about later.

Sheila Bates and I had every intention of retiring from the Board of Directors at this AGM but we have decided that, like marriage, this is for better for worse, and we now want to see the project through to completion, especially as we are so nearly reaching that stage. Unfortunately, we have lost three directors this year because they had other commitments and I would like to thank Stuart Hutton, Harry Black and Vivian Moir for their support as directors and their continuing support at present. I would also like to thank Stuart for providing the food and drink for tonight's event. I think I should also mention that Stuart and Harry are heavily involved with the Beaully Firth and Glens Pipe Band which was, until recently, a subsidiary of the Trust. The bookkeeping and other matters were becoming complicated for both groups and we have, therefore, decided to part company. The Trust wishes the Pipe Band the best of luck in their future ventures.

Finally, there are only four other directors currently serving on the Board apart from myself, and I would like to thank them all very much for the considerable effort they have put into achieving the current level of business and community service that we are now offering here at the Centre.

We have achieved a great deal in the last 12 months and we hope you feel that we are moving in the right direction. Your continued support is crucial to the Trust and we would welcome any feedback. If any member would like to contribute, we are looking for new directors and volunteers.