

Issue No 12  
Winter 2011

Editor:  
Martin Gostwick,  
Secretary

# Hugh's News

Newsletter of  
The Friends of Hugh Miller



*Festive greetings for  
Christmas and the New Year  
to all our Members*



*Dr Alix*

## Opening up a “treasure house”

By Dr Alix Powers-Jones,  
Hugh Miller's Birthplace Cottage & Museum Property Manager  
Dear Friends,

It is hard for me to believe, but I have almost completed my first six months working for the National Trust for Scotland at Hugh Miller's Birthplace Cottage & Museum... and *what* a six months – my feet have barely touched the ground! From a personal perspective, the joy of just being able to jump on my tricycle and whiz around the corner to work, rather than sit in a car and commute for two and a half hours a day, has not faded. My work-life balance is immensely improved. It is more than that however. It is a joy being able to make a positive contribution to the cultural life of my adopted home town.

As a newcomer to the Trust it has been a fast learning curve as I have tried to take on board Trust policy and working methods. The simple spatial constraints of Hugh Miller's have been both a treasure and a trial. Miller's Cottage and House are examples of 18th and 19th century vernacular architecture at its best. They are small but (almost) perfectly formed. A property in miniature. Small spaces lovingly conserved and presented at a human scale, to tell a personal story. The “trial” is no space to store and no space to work, but it is amazing what improvements can be made by the provision of a couple of office chairs and a filing cabinet. At last I can get at the files – current and upcoming – a balm against the chaos of disorder.

I came into post on the very last day of May this year when the season was already in full swing, having commenced on the 1st April. A combination of the new, longer opening hours (1200 to 1700 hrs, 7 days per week in the summer) and the economic downturn encouraging people to choose UK rather than foreign holidays has meant that the number of visitors to the property has been very healthy this summer.

The property saw almost five thousand visitors through the doors (excluding those who just went into the shop) which is a huge increase on last year.

Notably, we had a very large increase in the sale of admission tickets meaning that we are attracting a different range of visitors, in addition to the loyal Trust members who do not pay on the door. These may well include individuals who would have gone on foreign holidays in previous years, but now are wary of making such a financial commitment. Visitors are watching their pennies and this is underlined by a fall in donations to the property.



*The new plaque in Lydia Garden, named in honour of the family and descendants. It will be formally unveiled next season. It is inscribed in gold leaf on polished Caithness Flagstone. The plaque was made by Sutherland Stonework of Golspie, and installed by Cromarty joiner Nick Bates.*

Fortunately, the retail figures continue to hold steady and are in line with the increased foot-fall due to longer opening hours.

By far our largest outgoings are, of course, staff costs. I am very fortunate to have a simply splendid Senior Assistant (Zooulla Spirou) and, over the summer, two conscientious seasonal staff (Lauren Schroeder and Sheila MacDonald). Without their hard work and dedication the property cannot function and cannot provide its central learning and education remit. It is my aim in life to ensure that every single visitor leaves the property having learnt one new fact. To paraphrase another well-known animal charity tag-line:

***Learning is for life, not just for children***

With two separate buildings to staff, 7 days per week when we are open to the public and 3 separate property gardens to maintain, it is vital for the property to recruit and retain a core team of committed volunteers. The whole staff team (paid and unpaid) are the very life-blood of any property. We are very fortunate to have a core of volunteers (including Martin and Frieda Gostwick, Janey Clark, Dr Lindsay Hemy, Yvonne Lambert, and Sandy and Patsy Thomson) who turn out regularly to staff the front desk, run the shop and tame the wayward gardens; and we welcome our newest volunteer: Dr Liz Broumley, who is starting the long and fiddly process of checking the collection inventory over the winter. Thank you to you all.

If you have a couple of hours to spare and are looking for a challenging task and an enjoyable time there are always plenty of things to be done at the property, from sweeping and tidying the gardens; to cataloguing and collection care. Why don't you join us? For details, give me a ring on 0844-493-2158 or email millermuseum@nts.org.uk .



*The "edging knife" plunged deep into the ridge during last year's rethatching.*



*Visitors enjoy soaking up the information about the "Garden of Wonders" in Miller's Yard*

Now that we have closed to the public for the winter, the real work begins. All those things, large and small, that need to be addressed in the fabric of the buildings. There are squeaky floor boards to be secured, doors to be painted, ventilator grills to be fitted; window flashings made good. The surveyor has been busy and we will have the trades on-site in the next couple of weeks. On the inside, I finally have time to sit down and write, to flesh out the bare bones of the Property Activity Plan for informal learning and formal education. The Activity Plan has four main themes, built around the idea of the property as a *treasure house* or *cuilidh* in Gaelic. The four themes based around Miller's work are:

<b><i>Treasury of shapes</i></b>	<b><i>Treasury of words</i></b>
<b><i>Treasury of objects</i></b>	<b><i>Treasury of ideas</i></b>

The first 3 themes are aimed at all ages, while the fourth (Treasury of ideas) is aimed at senior teenagers and adults because of its more serious content. There is much development work to be done over the next five months, sourcing content, writing text and lesson plans. Most importantly I will be talking again with colleagues, with primary and senior schools in Inverness and the Black Isle and universities within Highland and beyond to make sure that the development is progressing along the most productive lines.

It is intended that the Activity Plan will provide learning opportunities that fit with the schools' *Curriculum for Excellence*; with national research themes such as the Dark Narrative project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council; and with popular science themes such as *Energising Minds* currently being promulgated by the British Science Association. There is much to keep us busy.

Aside from the moral imperative of learning and education, on a very practical basis the Activity Plan in operation will allow us to generate income from schools, to make better use of our collection; to get communities involved with our work and to raise the profile of the property. I'd better start writing...

Here's to *learning for life!*

## LANDMARK SERIES, No 2

*Some of our members have suggested that we publish a series of articles about historic sites associated with Miller. We did in fact begin this process with an article about the reopening of the East Kirk in the previous issue (No 11). We continue with a piece about a local landmark, well known to residents but little noticed by the wider world.*

# Hugh Miller and the Coalheugh Well at Cromarty

*By Michael Taylor (National Museums Scotland and University of Leicester) and Hugh Torrens (University of Keele)*

*Cromarty's architecture is rightly famous, but the Coalheugh Well of Miller's The Old Red Sandstone has been, we think, unjustly neglected. It is a rare, and possibly unique, upstanding survival of a failed 'pre-scientific' coal prospecting venture from before the time of William Smith (1769-1839).*

## Location

The Well, more correctly an aquifer source, lies below the site of St Regulus's chapel, where Hugh and Lydia Miller's eldest child Eliza is buried. It is easily accessible where the Reeds Path Loop to the water processing plant crosses the Old Chapel Burn debouching from the 'den' or wooded ravine in the old sea-cliff.

The wellhead is a mossy masonry dome about chest-high to an adult, with an outlet on one side: plainly there is enough pressure to produce a head of at least a metre or so above ground, giving 'one of the finest specimens of a true Artesian well which I have anywhere seen' (Miller 1841, p. 181).

Then as now, '[t]he waters are not strongly tintured, - a consequence, perhaps, of their great abundance; but we may see every pebble and stalk in their course enveloped by a ferruginous coagulum, resembling burnt sienna, that has probably been disengaged from the dark red sandstone below, which is known to owe its colour to the oxide of iron' (p. 182).

The colour, and the traditional depth of the bore (below), indeed suggest that the water is passing through Old Red Sandstone rather than the overlying Ice Ages and modern deposits. Like Miller, we can infer the underlying geology of Old Red Sandstone nodular mudstones and shales (including Miller's famous fossil fish bed), from the outcrops in the stream bed, and along the nearby beach.

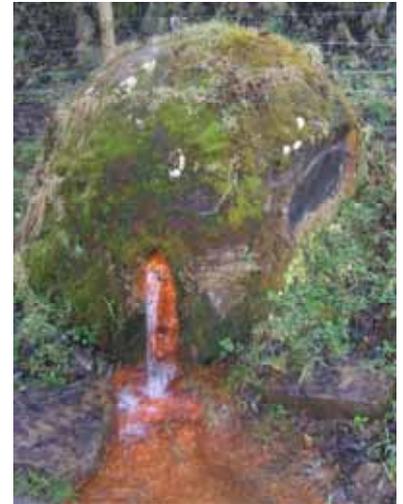
## Origin

Perhaps based on oral tradition, Miller ascribed the Well to George Mackenzie, first Earl of Cromartie (1630-1714) – probably wrongly, David Alston notes in his history *My little town of Cromarty*. But whoever the 17th or 18th century landowner was, he or his advisors, as Miller plausibly suggested (1841, pp. 180-181) were misled by abundant plant remains and occasional bitumen in the grey shales in the stream bed 'into the belief that coal might be found ... He accordingly brought miners from the south, and set them to bore for coal in the gorge of the ravine'.

But this was before the last years of the 18th and first years of the 19th century when William Smith developed his key insights, firstly that sedimentary rocks occurred in a recognisable geological sequence, secondly that rocks of the same type (such as shale) could occur at many positions in that sequence (so that rock type was no guide to position), and thirdly that the rocks of a particular stratigraphical position could be reliably recognised only by their constituent fossils.

Smith's insight helped distinguish the true coal measures from barren rocks elsewhere in the sequence which looked superficially similar, for instance in containing bits of coal-like lignite (fossil wood). Given the huge, and growing, importance of coal, this was of immediate, and enormous, use, in guiding what should at once have become – but too often did not - a scientifically based search for coal. There was then too great a gap between what scientists knew and what coal miners did.

Before Smith's insights, the Cromarty prospectors were blind to the fossil evidence, even the very notion, that they were dealing with rocks below the Carboniferous Coal Measures. As Miller put it, 'there might be some possibility of their penetrating to the central fire, but none whatever of their ever reaching a vein of coal.'



*The well waters are 'enveloped by a ferruginous coagulum'*

But 'they were prevented from ascertaining, by actual experience, the utter barrenness of the formation ... They had bored to a considerable depth, when, on withdrawing the kind of augre [auger] used for the purpose, a bolt of water, which occupied the whole diameter of the bore, came rushing after like the jet of a fountain, and the work was prosecuted no further; for, as steam-engines were not yet invented, no pit could have been wrought with so large a stream issuing into it; and as the volume was evidently restricted by the size of the bore, it was impossible to say how much greater a stream the source might have supplied.

' The spring still continues to flow towards the sea between its double row of cresses, at the rate of about a hogshead [variable measure – usually by then 52.5 gallons, just under 200 litres] per minute, - a rate considerably diminished, it is said, from its earlier volume, by some obstruction in the bore. ... the recollection of it is ... preserved by tradition ... and by the name of the well, which is still known as the well of the coal-heugh, - the old Scotch name for a coal-pit' (pp. 181-182). Heuch or heugh is Scots for a pit or mine - but also for a cliff or high bank (*Concise Scots Dictionary*), and is therefore doubly appropriate here, whatever the original intention. David Alston kindly informs us that the modern local pronunciation of Coalheugh is 'callie-shoch'.

Other trials for coal would be carried out in the district, even after Smith's work, for, as well as the Old Red Sandstone, the Jurassic black shales at Eathie were also temptingly lignite-bearing. One wonders how often the same mistakes were made. But we know very little about them - except for trials carried out against Miller's advice at Eathie about 1852 (traces of at least one shaft are visible north of the bothy).

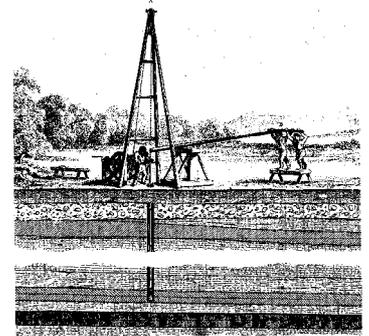
David Alston kindly points out that the Well was later used to supplement the unsatisfactory town supply through an iron pipe run from the well around 1859-63, while, more recently, in *The Cromarty We Knew*, Eric Malcolm recalls the tap on the garden wall of Clunes House, "spring water piped from the Collie well ... always cold, but it tasted most strongly of iron ... very handy after a hot game of tennis iron water or not." Today, however, the water flows freely to the burn and thence to the sea.

### A final comment

The Well is a very special reminder of the economic importance of geology, complementing the oil platforms so often parked within sight in the Firth.

As so often, Miller (1841, p. 183) gives an admirable last word:

'... geology, in a peculiar manner, supplies to the intellect an exercise of ... [an] ennobling character. But it has also its cash value. The time and money squandered in Great Britain alone in searching for coal in districts where the well-informed geologist could have at once pronounced the search hopeless, would much more than cover the expense at which geological research has been prosecuted throughout the world.'



'A hand-operated rig of the kind likely to have been employed at the Coalheugh'.



Dr Taylor discusses the characteristics of the well on site with delegates to the Hugh Miller: Local Hero geology conference (2008)

### Acknowledgements

We are grateful to Lyall Anderson for discussion of local geology, Alison Morrison-Low for advice on hogsheads, and David Alston and John Nightingale for local information. We gratefully acknowledge an earlier version in the International Commission for the History of Geology Newsletter issue 35 (published in 2003, pages 25-26), and permission by the then editor David Oldroyd and current editor Barry Cooper for this republication with update and revision.

### Further reading

MILLER, H. 1841. *The Old Red Sandstone, or, New walks in an old field*. John Johnstone, Edinburgh.

TORRENS, H. S. 2003. *William Smith (1769-1839) and the search for English raw materials: some parallels with Hugh Miller and Scotland*, pp. 137-155 in BORLEY, L. (ed.) 2003. *Celebrating the life and times of Hugh Miller. Scotland in the early 19th century ...* Cromarty Arts Trust, Cromarty, etc.



## Book review

# SIR GILBERT'S CHILDREN

By Harriet Miller Davidson

This is a delightful short fictional tale about her childhood written by Hugh and Lydia Miller's daughter Harriet shortly before her death in Australia 1883, aged only 44.

The novel is set in her parents' last home, the handsome villa Shrub Mount, Portobello, and a quaint old holiday cottage in Burntisland, Fife.

Many happy, rumbustious domestic scenes occur between Harriet (Marjie), William (Dick), Bessie (Molly) and Hugh Junior (Gill), and the adventures in Fife and the climactic rescue on the Bass Rock make a satisfying read.

What might have given the novel greater historical value would have been more convincing character portrayals of Hugh and Lydia. I cannot imagine what Hugh Miller would have made of being ennobled as "Sir Gilbert Munro," given his extreme wariness of the gentry.

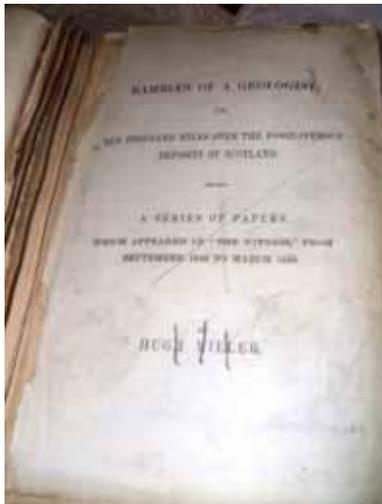
In his authoritative introduction, Henry McKenzie Johnston, notes: "In her embroidering of those memories ... she reveals, I think, that secretly she had always wished that the father...had enjoyed a higher social status."

He notes that after Hugh's death, "there was a wholly unsubstantiated belief in the family that he had declined the offer of a knighthood."

However, we see enough of the real unassuming, devoted father recognisable from other first hand witnesses to make this little book worthwhile, and indeed touching.

*Publishers, For The Right Reasons, of Inverness, £4.50. All proceeds from the book's sale go to The Friends of Hugh Miller, as a donation from management committee member Henry McKenzie Johnston who funded its publication. Anyone wishing to order a copy by post should contact the secretary, Martin Gostwick. Mail orders are £5.50 inc P & P.*

## SECOND SCRAP BOOK UNEARTHED



The title page of the *Rambles'* galley proofs

It has been most gratifying to be able to confirm the existence of a second "scrapbook" volume of galley proofs, this one for Miller's book *Rambles of a Geologist*.

It turned up in a search through the Miller artefacts and papers held in the Museum's reserve collections room.

This follows the return to the Museum earlier this year of a proofs scrapbook for Miller's autobiography, *My Schools and Schoolmasters*, also believed to have been run off the presses of his newspaper, *The Witness*.

The title page shown here gives the book's imposing sub-title, *Ten Thousand Miles Over the Fossiliferous Deposits of Scotland*, and below, it explains that the book contains "A series of papers which appeared in *The Witness* from September 1848 to March 1849."

The book, jacketed in a soft brown felt, has the splendid provenance, "presented to the Institute by Mrs Miller Mackay," with a date 1902.

Mrs Mackay was of course Miller's younger daughter, Bessie, and the presentation was to the Hugh Miller Institute in the year of its opening, which was also the Centenary of his birth. Bessie also edited her mother Lydia's diaries into a series of articles published in *Chamber's Journal* that same year. These can be read in the Parlour of Miller House.

The Institute, now Cromarty's public library and community meeting room, was originally intended to operate as a museum of "Milleriana," in support of the Birthplace Cottage just along the road, as well as a library.

As a published book, *Rambles* has always appeared in a single volume, following Miller's epic *The Cruise of the Betsey*, which also first appeared as a series of articles in *The Witness*.

# FULL MUSEUM ACCREDITATION

The Museum has just received full accreditation, which means it is recognised as fulfilling the museum industry's highest standards.

Andrew Motion, chairman of the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA), which, with National Museums Scotland (NMS), granted the award, commented: "This is an impressive achievement."

Museum manager Alix Powers-Jones said when the award was announced on 20 September: "We are proud that one of Scotland's smallest museums is meeting industry standards. It's fantastic."

Accreditation acknowledges how a museum is run, how it looks after its collections, how its staff perform their tasks, and the services it provides to visitors. The award makes possible loans between museums and other collections, and allows for grant applications to facilitate further developments.

## DONATIONS

### 1 Treasures of Charles Bannerman

It was one of the proverbial "lucky finds" - a collection of drawings and letters lying forgotten in a garden shed.

The drawings were of Cromarty scenes by the late Charles Bannerman, which he sent to a friend with accompanying letters while he was resident in Miller House, where he died aged 81 in 1993.

The house was purchased by The National Trust for Scotland from Mr Bannerman's estate in 1995, and converted to become the Hugh Miller Museum in 2004.

Mr Bannerman's memorabilia have now been donated to the Museum's collections, by Mr Vinnie O'Connell, who performed a great service of rescue and research.

He spotted them in the garden shed of his London home. They were among heaps of material belonging to a former owner, which he was about to throw into a skip,. He undertook to find out about their origins, and this ultimately led him to Miller House and the donation.

Charles Bannerman was a celebrated cartoonist and illustrator whose work featured in national magazines and newspapers. He lived in Miller House from the early 1970s, following his retirement.

He was also a gifted painter and his pictures of Cromarty were extremely popular. They are still to be found in many Cromarty homes and further afield, mostly purchased at the annual exhibitions of the Cromarty Group of artists which he founded.

Museum manager Dr Alix Powers-Jones indicated she plans to put some of the drawings and letters on display, and if this is possible, it should stimulate strong local interest.

### 2 Treasured old Miller titles

The Friends warmly thanks Isabel Markham of Eltham, Surrey, for the gift of two Victorian editions of Miller titles, in response to our appeal for old editions in the last issue of Hugh's News. They have now been presented to the Museum for evaluation either to join its Library stock or for sale to the benefit of the Friends.

One is an 1869 William Nimmo reprint of *The Old Red Sandstone*, noted on the title page as "Twelfth Thousand." The second is an 1889 reprint of *My Schools and Schoolmasters*, also by Nimmo, Hay and Mitchell, stated to be a "New Cheap Re-Issue of the works of Hugh Miller, at 3/6 (three shillings and sixpence)each volume."

Below this are quoted encomiums from leaders of "Literary and scientific opinion," among them The Duke of Argyll, Thomas Carlyle, Sir David Brewster and Charles Dickens. These books testify that Miller retained his eminence in the pantheon of great Scots for decades after his death.

Don't forget, dear members, if you have any surplus books by or about Hugh Miller, we'd love to hear from you.

## OPEN LETTER

## REVIVED HIGHLAND HISTORY JOURNAL

Dear Friends of Hugh Miller

I thought you would be interested to read some details regarding the reincarnation of the journal, Northern Scotland.

The background to this is that about three years ago Professor Jim Hunter (then Director of the UHI Centre for History) and Professor Marjory Harper (Department of History, University of Aberdeen) collaborated in the resuscitation and re-launch of the journal, which had been first produced by academics at Aberdeen in the 1970s but which, more recently, had been allowed to fade away.

On Professor Hunter retiring from the Centre (although very much retaining an involvement) I took over as co-editor from the UHI side, while Professor Harper has continued to do the same from the Aberdeen side. Since 2010, we have taken ownership of the journal's title and vested this in a charitable company limited by guarantee, also called Northern Scotland. Indeed, the company was established that same year, and in its Articles of Association the objects are stated to be the advancement of education, the arts, heritage, culture and science, particularly but not exclusively through the publication of a journal of academic merit, Northern Scotland.

Previously, Northern Scotland was published in-house at Aberdeen. Last year, however, we managed to get a major press, Edinburgh University Press (EUP), to take it on. This gives us much more credibility academically than we'd otherwise have had – and hugely enhances the appearance and overall quality of the publication. The editorial board includes academics, both historians and non-historians, from across Scotland and beyond.

Now we're looking to get the journal better known and boost its circulation. In this connection, it would be great if we could draw Northern Scotland to the attention of your members.

You'll get a flavour of the journal and its contents at the EUP website –

<http://www.euppublishing.com/journal/nor>

I'm happy to supply any further information you may require.

Regards,

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# FRIENDS OF HUGH MILLER MEMBERSHIP APPEAL

Having read this newsletter, will Members now please consider some of the following actions:

- Increasing your subscription contribution.
- Making a donation.
- Inviting family or friends to join, with the following message from us:

We have pleasure in inviting you to consider subscribing to the charity, named The Friends of Hugh Miller. The Friends' annual subscription has been set at £10 per person. Subscribers receive a Membership Card, a copy of the constitution, a periodical newsletter and an annual report. We look forward to welcoming you as a Member of the Friends.

## MEMBERSHIP FORM

I WISH to become a member of the charity, The Friends of Hugh Miller (SC 037351), in order to support its work in making Miller's life and work better known, and in particular to assist in the development of the Hugh Miller Museum and Birthplace Cottage in Church Street, Cromarty.

**Name**.....

**Address**.....

.....

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Membership subscription is £10 annually, payable by cash/cheque or bank standing order.

We will send standing order and Gift Aid forms on request.

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