

Hugh Miller Re- told: the case for refurbishing Hugh Miller's Birthplace Cottage & Museum

Alix Powers-Jones April 2019

1. Why is it important to refurbish Hugh Miller's?

Hugh Miller was an ordinary man who did extra-ordinary things; the Highlander who changed the world. A self-taught geologist who transformed what we know about the world and who stood shoulder to shoulder with the scientific luminaries of his day such as Charles Darwin. A dedicated social justice campaigner who spoke out for the rights of ordinary men and women over the iniquities of the Scottish Church and the injustice of enforced land clearance and migration. Miller was a man who communicated to a wide variety of audiences, from scientific peers, to readers of the local newspapers and demonstrated that everyone of us has the potential to make a difference. We have to tell his story.

2. Our mission statement (Forward Plan 2019-24)

To **engage** with all our visitors in an accessible and inclusive manner; to **illuminate** the story of Hugh Miller, his inimitable contributions to Scottish life and global understanding of the world; and to **inspire** others (in Miller's words) to *"learn to make a right use of your eyes"*

3. Current Position (April 2019)

- Miller House opened to the public in 2004 after tremendous efforts by the previous two managers (Frieda and then Martin Gostwick) to raise funding, create the plans and deliver this interpretation centre.
- Since this time (2004), the interpretation of HMBCM has stayed largely the same with fixed displays and little space for temporary exhibitions or changes of display. This is to the detriment of the
 - collection (particularly documents and textiles which are light sensitive and which would benefit from being "rested" off display)
 - tourist visitors – some of whom feel that they have "seen it all before"
 - local community visitors – who are not tempted to revisit and to see what's new
 - property income
 - reputation of the property and the NTS as uncaring?
- There have been some minor changes in use of spaces within the buildings, and these have improved
 - the visitor journey
 - our retailing position
 - conservation of the collection
 - management of the property portfolio
 - our ability to hold learning opportunities (e.g. public talks, school classes)
- Visitor Numbers are largely stagnant – hovering around the 4,000 (+/- 10%) visitors per year mark for the last few years.
- Our income from tourist visitors is limited:
 - Over 80% of our visitors do not buy tickets to enter (e.g. NTS/NT members)
 - Small retailing space
 - Very limited refreshment space (no café possible)
 - Limited useable space for events/conferences etc.
 - Limited events programme
- VisitScotland have said that the museum is in danger of losing its coveted 5* Visitor Attraction grading because the museum no longer merits this grading. This is due, in no small part, to:
 - Dated style
 - Tired interpretation
 - Changes in visitor profile
 - Changes in visitor expectation

- Limited, small-scale engagement with our community visitors.
 - Limited working space
 - Limited storage
 - Crowded wall space (distracting!)
 - Clunky kit (especially AV for guest speakers)

4. The future?

We want to be

- **financially sustainable**, diversifying our offer to spread the financial risk and build resilience for the future.
- **telling fascinating stories** in an engaging manner using a myriad of methods. Note that “*stories*” in this context are taken to be the method of creating engaging, resonant narrative, rather than myth or fairy tale and may include:
 - objects to view
 - objects to handle
 - interpretation panels and written content
 - light
 - sound
 - digital objects
 - digital content
- **telling vibrant stories** in an inclusive manner with language and layout suitable for a mixed audience including those who
 - have physical impairment (including mobility, sight loss, deafness)
 - have learning differences (including dementia, autism, dyslexia)
 - societal differences (traditionally these are non-museum users)
 - do not have English as a first language
- **telling challenging stories** which are relevant to today including issues of:
 - migration
 - mental health
 - health and well being
 - social justice
- **community capacity building** - working with geographic communities and communities of interest including:
 - Lifelong learning
 - Health and Well-being
 - Supporting and developing ACTIVE (participatory) NTS membership including volunteers
 - Encouraging staff development (succession planning)
 - Enjoyment and FUN!
- **partnership working** with
 - Friends groups, volunteers and supporters
 - other NTS properties and groups
 - other heritage organisations
 - universities and schools

Hugh Miller's Birthplace Cottage & Museum is a small property of 2 domestic buildings and 4 domestic gardens, but it has some powerful stories to tell which have relevance and resonance in 2019 and beyond.

5. The plan – refreshing the exhibition

A considered process with approximate timescales.

Step	Timing	
1.	Autumn 2018 to Spring 2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consultation with stakeholders. An essential starting point for the work based on identifying: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ which stories (themes) the museum will tell? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Consultations so far: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • staff (including interns) SWOT analysis Autumn 2018 • Martin Gostwick – 1-to-1 discussion 15/01/2019 • Tuesday Talks Group Autumn 19/02/2019 ▪ Proposed consultations: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Friends of Hugh Miller – AGM 5th April – starting point • Local community • Visitor consultation – short exit survey • Partnership organisations – heritage • Partner organisations – tourism e.g. cruise sector, • Museums Galleries Scotland – advice • Support organisations e.g. RNIB, RNID, Dementia Scotland • Schools • Others ○ how the spaces will be used, ideas for <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ themes ▪ rooms – use and layouts ○ how the stories will be told e.g. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ written word ▪ light ▪ sound ▪ touch ▪ digital • Identification of challenges to inclusive storytelling (adaptable, flexible) suitable for different groups. This is NOT dumbing down. Aspects to consider include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ non-native English speakers ▪ other written/spoken word language summaries ▪ non-spoken languages e.g. Deaf (BSL users) identifying as separate, culturally rich community ▪ learning differences (dementia, dyslexia) ▪ physical impairments (sight, sound, deaf [who use spoken language enhanced by lip reading and/or aids], mobility impaired). ▪ cultural differences
2.	Spring 2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establishing a budget – core budget from NTS, plus identify external funding sources may also be approached to support the project.
3.	Winter 2019 on	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preparation of outline brief (in conjunction with Culloden) for design consultants as part of bidding process.
4.	Spring 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Approach designers and circulate brief.

5.	Summer 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Consider submissions and appoint designers.
6.	Winter 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Physical refurbishment and Programme Development
7.	Spring 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Grand Reopening