



# Cromarty East Church Newsletter



Issue 10: winter 2010/11 Edited by Caroline Vawdrey

## New vibrancy to old colours

Funding from BBC 'Restoration Village' and the Pilgrim Trust has enabled conservation work to be carried out on wooden painted armorial panels and on painted panels that are now part of a pew.



Section of armorial panels prior to conservation

Created for Sir Kenneth Mackenzie and Lady Anne Campbell in 1702, the armorial panels were re-used as backs of pews in the laird's loft. It is a salutary tale of how how quickly family fortunes can decline and tastes change, but we are also lucky that they were re-used rather than discarded.

There is a similar history for the painted pew panels upstairs in the north loft. These may have been commissioned by Sir Kenneth, but the style is very different, and they could be older.

The experts carrying out the conservation work are Fiona Allardyce and Karen Dundas of Scottish Wallpainting Conservators, with a little companionable help from Fiona's collie- Alsatian cross

who made it his job to guard the church while they were there.

Before they began work on the armorial panels, Fiona and Karen carried

Repair of armorial panel



out a detailed inspection. Karen comments, "Its intriguing that Cromarty society has re-used and relocated the armorial panels." In re-use the panels were cut down from much broader panels, with fine tongue and groove joints inserted. It is work of great skill.



Deer head before and after cleaning

The principles of painted wood conservation are similar for both the armorial and pew panels; that is gently removing layers of built up dirt and varnish that have dulled and obscured the original bright oil painting. The cleaned paintings are protected with a removable varnish and finally they are treated for woodworm.



Section of armorial panels after conservation work

## Meet ... *the conservators*



Fiona (top) & Karen (below) cleaning pew panels

Fiona Allardyce and Karen Dundas have worked together as Scottish Wallpaintings Conservators since 2006. Both enjoy the connections between art and buildings that their work gives them.

Talking about this appeal Fiona comments, "I was attracted to wall paintings because of their scale, because they are where they belong and so form part of the history of their location in a way that easel paintings usually do not. They often relate directly to the people of their location, as is the case with the Cromarty panels." Karen adds, "Not being able to move murals can make work complicated and even uncomfortable, but figuring out ways to cope is rewarding."

Karen and Fiona relish this challenge of trying to understand the bigger picture of the history of paintings, and the building that contains them. The Mackenzie armorial panels typify that challenge. As Fiona says, "I love their grandiose classically inspired cartouche designs, the great length of the original timber panels, the finesse of the workmanship to re-use them as part of the pews, and the mystery surrounding their original size and location within the church"



# 'Donald Miller's wars with the sea'



*'Donald Miller was a true Scotchman. He was bred a shoemaker; and painfully did he toil late and early for about twenty-five years with one solitary object in view...'*

So writes Hugh Miller in the 19th century 'Scenes and Legends of the North of Scotland'. His toils were to protect his house, Burnside Cottage - which lies close to the shore - from the sea.

Miller describes the defences he built 'toiling as never labourer toiled'. His fourth construction paved the beach until 'it presented the appearance of a sloping street' and above this rose 'a ponderous wall' and a 'neat, firm parapet surmounted the whole'. Winter came and he had at last 'fairly triumphed over the sea'. His construction still helps to protect the cottage today.

Donald died aged 71 and his grave lies close to the south wall of the church. He was associated with the church during his lifetime too. William Mackay Mackenzie,

writing in 1902 describes the east (Lairds) loft which he says had an external stairway until 1848 and states 'a special officer served the Lairds Loft ... by its own functionary it was open and closed... The last of these officials was Donald Miller.' He also writes that Donald presented Hugh Miller with a black letter (gothic script) bible that had once belonged to the Urquharts of Cromarty.

Donald Miller's association with Hugh Miller continues, as adjacent to his grave slab is one for Alexander Munro who died at sea in 1829. The stone was erected by Donald's sister Isobel Miller and by looks to have been carved by Hugh.



## Sir Thomas: 400th anniversary celebration

Speakers from far and wide will be converging on Cromarty next spring to celebrate the life and works of Sir Thomas Urquhart.

Conference Organiser for the Cromarty Arts Trust, Sandy Thomson, says, "Many people are fascinated by Sir Thomas. There have been several biographies - the most recent by a Professor at Rome University - and he has appeared as a fictional character in books by Alasdair Gray and Andrew Drummond.

"The fact that we have attracted speakers to the Conference from New York and Amsterdam as well as Oxford and Cambridge shows that interest in him is not confined to the Black Isle or even to Scotland. I am especially delighted that the Clan Urquhart Society has agreed to sponsor a reception for delegates in the East Church, a building that Sir Thomas knew well."

The conference is on 15 and 16 April. You can find out more on their website [www.urquhartconference.org.uk](http://www.urquhartconference.org.uk) or contact the Cromarty Arts Trust on 01381 600354

## New knowledge from old burials

The archaeological survey of the East Church found that the whole of the building's east-west axis is filled with burials, confirming its medieval origins, as all burials were outside after the 1560 change to Protestantism.



The excavation of a small trench revealed a mass of bones, suggesting that they were thrown back in after a new burial had taken place. In the lower part of the trench more complete skeletons were found, although they were again cut through with other burials.

One skeleton was analysed by bone expert Susan Higgins. She found that this to be a young woman about 5 feet high and aged between 25 and 35. She had bone and vertebra damage that suggests that she may have suffered from tuberculosis, bone infection and osteoarthritis. It is moving to think of the pain that she must have dealt with in her short life.



## To keep up-to-date with what's happening at the East Church

\* Check out our website at [www.eastchurchcromarty.co.uk](http://www.eastchurchcromarty.co.uk)

\* Look for updates in the window of the house next to the church

\* Contact the community and education officers - Caroline and David on 01381 600243 or by emailing [info@eastchurchcromarty.co.uk](mailto:info@eastchurchcromarty.co.uk)

