

Chairman's Annual Report for the AGM 25th May 2021

I would like to start by thanking everyone, Friends, Volunteers, Trustees, Committee Members, and our visitors, for their support of the Heritage Centre during an unprecedented and difficult period in 2020.

Two committee members have stood down this year, due to personal pressures, so I take this opportunity to thank Ben Dickson-Green and John Stevenson for their contribution to the Centre.

Several volunteers have also stepped down for various reasons including ill health and age. Thank you to all of them for their time and effort in supporting us. However, the number of friends and Volunteers continues to increase. In 2018 when I became Membership Secretary, we had 48 Friends and Volunteers on the database. Today there are 114 on the database.

To say that I landed in the frying pan in February 2020 when elected Chairman, is to understate the storm that lay ahead of us. It has been a very challenging year for us all personally and for the Centre itself. Loss of revenue, loss of visitors, volunteers understandably reluctant to come to the Centre, financial challenges – just some of the issues your Committee and Trustees have had to deal with while the leadership of the team changed, which is always a challenge.

However, every cloud can have a silver lining. Normally we might say ‘has’ a silver lining, but I know elsewhere in the museum sector that many museums like ourselves are in great difficulty and may not survive to see 2022. Sadly, there may be no silver lining for them.

The Heritage Centre however will survive. Financially the Committee took immediate action in March 2020 and cut all non-essential expenditure and identified other savings. We applied for a number of Government grants and Arts Council England funding – some successfully – and we created a plan which allowed us to partially re-open in July 2020, generating much needed income, albeit at a lower level than normal.

Committee meetings went online very successfully using Zoom, with which many of you will have become familiar, and the Committee worked on a whole range of initiatives we might not have otherwise had time to deal with, including:

1. Improved financial tracking and forecasting. Development of more detailed budgets.
2. Development of a risk register to assess and mitigate risks to the management and success of the Heritage Centre.
3. Launch of a new publication –A Country Bairn, written by our Friend Tom Batey, formerly of Broomhill and Gilchesters farms, with three new publications now ready for May 2021.
4. Development of a reserves policy and allocation of funding to reserves.
5. Conversion to Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO) status as agreed at the AGM in 2018 but not enacted upon at the time.
6. Completing of the cataloguing of our collections backlog.
7. Tidying up of the archive store in the roof space.
8. Creation of a secure storage shed at the side of the premises for non-collection related items (these were previously scattered in the loft).
9. Display and signage of two mine tubs on the station platform.

10. Development and expansion of Historic England's Heritage Schools Programme to be launched formally later this year and underlining the words of the Heritage Centre that "Heritage is not just for Grown-Ups"

Many of the normal events we attend in person as Trustees or Committee members have moved online. However, there have been so many more opportunities to interact with others and learn online than there would have been otherwise. We have taken advantage of these to the full.

Later in 2020 we were successful in attracting grant funding from Museum Development North East which has allowed us to commence a range of projects including:

1. A new Interpretation Plan for the future use of the Centre to present, enhance and focus the current and future exhibitions for our target audiences, supported by social history and real-life stories.
2. A Volunteer and Trustee Recruitment and Development Plan.
3. Social Media training (currently underway).
4. An external Governance Review.
5. Governance improvements including checking progress against our Forward Plan and all our policies and procedures.
6. Development of Welcome Host training (currently underway).
7. Purchase of PPE to enable us to protect our volunteers and visitors and open the Centre when able.

In addition, we are also:

1. Undertaking development of our Volunteer policies, induction process and Volunteer Handbook.
2. Over 2020/21 – rewriting of our Accreditation Procedures and Policies to update them to the latest standard (Spectrum 5.0).

We are also involved in programmes from Museum Development North East covering:

1. Audience surveys and satisfaction.
2. Organisational Health Check.
3. Working with Newcastle University Business School on a small business sustainability programme.
4. (later this year) Developing digital initiatives in museums.

Thanks to the considerable generosity of a number of individuals we have received some substantial donation funding in the last year. Many thanks to every one of you.

We are not out of the woods yet, and indeed, are predicting a poor season in 2021 with income significantly down and a deficit on our balance sheet. We do anticipate recovery in 2022 both in terms of our finances and in terms of visitor numbers. This is in line with expectations of the Museum sector generally.

As we look forward to the remainder of 2021 and 2022 there are several areas the Heritage Centre will be developing.

- We will continue to recruit new volunteers, not just front of house, and offer them a range of training opportunities and roles.
- We wish to recruit more Trustees and committee Members with a wide range of expertise and experiences to help the Centre develop and expand..
- We have an online shop in development where online visitors will be able to buy our most popular books and games and other items.
- We are also enhancing our list of benefits to Friends and volunteers. Later this year we hope to be hosting some online digital sessions for you including previews of seasonal exhibitions and potentially an historical virtual village tour. We will be informing you about these later, and it is important that we have your email address if we do not have it already so that you can participate in these events.
- There has been a massive change in digital offerings in the museum sector in the last year, due to the Pandemic, and our own online offering has changed. It will continue to develop so that visitors have access to information and resources pre and post visits to the Centre.
- For the 2022 season start we are looking at further enhancements to the shop to improve our offer to visitors and to increase income to the Centre.
- Implementation of the Interpretation plan either by Grant funding or by our own investment in priority areas.
- Revamping and refurbishing the interior of the Parcel Shed on the Station Platform.
- To develop a new Forward Plan for the Heritage Centre, having already achieved so much against the existing 2018 Forward Plan.

As ever, if you have any ideas for the future of the Centre, we would be pleased to hear from you.

Many thanks for your support during a very difficult period for the Centre.

Best wishes

Steve Gibbon
Chairman