

Kyleakin Local History Society

What we need from you:

- Photographs.
- Newspaper cuttings.
- Help with putting names and dates to pictures.

Committee:

Caroline Clouston
Hector Grant
Sue Lyons
Ruth MacDougall
Margaret MacRae
Roddy Morrison
Anna Belle Robertson
John Robertson
Mike Taylor

We now have 67 members!

Well, we have certainly hit the ground running

We have already had well supported talks by Bill Ramsey on "The Port Napier"; by Martin Welch on his work as a mountain guide and "Memories of Kyleakin" by Ian Robertson and Ena Sikorski which took place in October, January and February respectively.

Although Ian and Ena answered questions on the night of their talk, they are happy to respond to any further questions any of you may have – please contact Caroline or Anna Belle to arrange.

Two more talks are planned for March and

April, after which time, we will take a break for the summer. This will give the committee time to plan the talks for the winter months in late 2011/2012!

The Burns Supper, held on 29th January was a huge success and the Society would like to thank everyone who attended for helping to make this an enjoyable evening. See report later on in this newsletter.

The Society is hoping to organise another display in the Post Office on 7th May to coincide with the "Highland Road Run for Vintage Commercial Vehicles" which will park up overnight on the Corran.

We also plan to organise a display for Gala week, but watch this space for further information.

We are still planning to set up a website, and we hope to be able to give you more news on this by the summer.

Just to remind you, we are able to scan up to A3 sized pictures and articles. So if you can loan the Society your pictures or newspaper cuttings, we will scan them and return them to you and your memories can form part of the next display.

The Society welcomes all offers of help and looks forward to seeing you at one of the talks in the future.

Do you know what these children are all dressed up for?



Also, do you know who they all are? If so, we would like to keep the details with the photograph for future reference.

Can you help:

A trophy which was won for "Tug of War" at the Kyleakin Highland Games in 1950 has been found and it is thought that there was a minute book relating to these Games – do you know where it is?

The Society received information on a rescue by two Binnie sisters (the Lighthouse keeper's daughters) in April 1903, does anyone have any information?

The society knows that people were evacuated to Kyleakin during WWII. Did your family move up here during this time; did you house evacuees; were you an evacuee who returned home and later moved back to Kyleakin. We'd love to hear from you.

In future newsletters, we will try and identify how the village developed in relation to:

- ❖ Churches
- ❖ Hotels
- ❖ Fishing
- ❖ Schools
- ❖ Shops and Cafes
- ❖ Tourism
- ❖ Organisations i.e. SWRI
- ❖ Kyleakin Highland Games
- ❖ Gala Days
- ❖ Sport
- ❖ Military
- ❖ Families
- ❖ Ferries

If you have any particular interest in any of these sections, or you think that there is something missing, please get in touch.

The Burns Supper

On Saturday 29th January, over 100 people gathered at the Kyleakin Village Hall for a Burns Supper.

The top table was piped-in by Ian Ruaridh Finlayson. The Chairperson for the evening - John (Slippy) Finlayson, regaled a number of humorous stories before proceeding onto the more formal part of the evening where he asked Caroline Clouston to recite the Selkirk Grace. The haggis was piped in by Ian Ruaridh Finlayson and was Addressed by John (Slippy) Finlayson. After the meal Bob Beatson delivered the Immortal Memory with the Toast to the Lasses given by Donald John MacLennon, to which Pat Anderson gave the Reply.

The traditional fare of haggis, neeps and tatties were prepared and served by Graeme Finnie and Ellen Reid with additional help in the kitchen from Catherine Grant and Julie Mace.

A team of waiters and waitresses were on hand to deliver the food to the tables and John and Phil seemed to be kept busy for most of the night serving drinks.

After the serving of coffee & shortbread, those present listened to songs by Pat Anderson & Bob Beatson. Margaret MacRae sang & recited poems which were written by her late mother – Helen (Nellie) MacRae.

The committee would like to thank everyone involved in the organisation and running of the Burns Supper, everyone who bought tickets and the invited guests. A special thank you must be given to Anna Belle & Caroline for the work they did, not only selling the tickets, but organising & "shopping" for the event.

£1218 was raised from the evening which will go towards the running of the society.

We have received a large number of positive comments from people who attended and it is likely that in view of the number of requests we will try and hold a Burns Supper again next year.

H.M.S. Port Napier
Talk given by Bill Ramsey on 27th October 2010

I believe that it will be worthwhile to consider some events that took place in 1939, before World War II broke out. The Admiralty had thought to close off access to the Arctic and Atlantic Oceans by laying a barrage of mines across from Orkney to the Norwegian coast, but later in July 1939 a new scheme was planned. They decided to lay minefields from Greenland, across the Denmark Strait to Iceland and from there to the Faeroe Islands, and thence to Orkney. Other fields would be laid from there along the route by Cape Wrath and the north west of Scotland, thereby closing the passage through the Minch. A minefield was established at the south end of the Irish Sea, with another on the east coast of Scotland and England. There were to be gaps to permit our own ships to pass through. The distance from Greenland was some 540 nautical miles and weather conditions in the northern waters were far from ideal. Protection for the minelayers would be difficult enough without stormy seas.

To launch a minelaying campaign, four essential requirements must be met: a base for the control, planning and loading facilities; minelaying vessels and crew; protection vessels for these ships; and regular manufacture and supply of mines.

Lochalsh was an ideal situation as it had a good harbour, and there was a rail link to the main network. The terrain was not too difficult to defend and it was almost out of range of the Luftwaffe bombers. Kyle of Lochalsh was to be re-named Port ZA and the base itself was given the title H.M.S. Trelawney. Stationed there were minesweeper drifters, net-laying drifters and barrage balloon drifters, in addition to two harbour defence vessels, the Convallaria and the Favour. There was also a system of controlled mines for the protection of the port and harbour.

In July 1940, the First Minelaying Squadron was formed, with fast merchant ships of the Blue Funnelers Line, Prince Line and Port Line, the Southern Prince (10,917 tons gross), the Port Napier (9847 tons gross), the Port Quebec (8490 tons gross), the Agamemnon (7592 tons gross) and the Menestheus (7494 tons gross). They carried mines to the total of 560, 550, 548, 530 and 410 respectively. These vessels were all converted to minelayers in British shipyards. The mines were mounted on small trolleys that ran on small gauge rail tracks between decks leading to launching ports in the stern.

The 17th Destroyer Division provided protection with old destroyers from the U.S.A. They were given in exchange for bases in the Caribbean and Newfoundland. These warships had to be completely refitted in the U.K. as they were unfit for service before major overhaul. Four of these escorts were the St. Margaret's, the Bath, the Hopewell and the Charleston. At times, other British warships supplemented cover. Sea trips from the base lasted from two to eight days depending on the area being covered and the prevailing weather.

The mines were manufactured in Dagenham, Oxford and Birmingham before loading of explosives in Bandeath near Stirling. Many a consignment of mines I saw passing whilst I was at home in Kingussie. They were left on sidings in Duirinish and on ships' lighters until needed. A total of 110,000 mines were laid before the minelaying squadron was paid off in late autumn (November) 1943. The Agamemnon remained on a care and maintenance routine for a further year, in case more deep minefields were needed at short notice.

The Port Napier was at anchor one evening before setting off and a fierce gale caused her to drag her two anchors. She was almost uncontrollable without 'tugs' in a howling gale at night in confined conditions. Every effort was made to get underway and re-anchor in safety, when the ship was blown across the bows of an anchored collier and her screws fouled the collier's anchor cables. Immediately, both of Port Napier's main engines were put out of action. The two ships continued to scrape anchors across the deep centre of the loch towards the southern shore of Skye until their combined anchors found bottom, and good holding ground again, and finally settled in the entrance to a shallow bay (near Sron an tairbh) close under the slope of Beinn Na Cailliche.

The fleet were making ready to sail out on a minelaying mission at this time in early November 1940, but Port Napier was left behind to disentangle herself, access the damage and await further orders. The following morning work began clearing her screws of the anchor cables from the collier's, and the opportunity was taken to complete fuelling with diesel oil. During this operation, a fire broke out in the engine-room, which at once became impossible to control. Within moments the engine-room was a raging furnace. The two mine decks, fully loaded, were above the engine-room and the mines had been prepared for launching with detonators and bungs in place, as was the habit at that time.

A mining party courageously worked to remove the detonators which had been inserted earlier, whilst the rest of the ship's company abandoned ship aboard the numerous small craft that were standing by. Within twenty minutes of the outbreak of fire the lower mine deck was white-hot and the danger acute. The last men were ordered to leave the ship.

At the subsequent board of enquiry, the mining party who had remained behind to the last minute declared they believed that all detonators had been taken out from the casings but they could not be sure.

After the ship had been abandoned, the Kyle residents were told to leave their homes and go to the hills for safety. Trains were sent away and all shipping was cleared from the port. The Port Napier was left to burn. There would have been multiple casualties and widespread damage to Kyle if the mines on board blew up.

Strange to say, I have not heard of any evacuation of property in Kyleakin at this time but this might have been on account of the situation of the village.

A mine loaded with explosives, but with primer and detonator removed, will not explode but it will burn fiercely. With primer inserted but no detonator in place, it is unlikely to explode but may do under certain conditions.

After the ship had been abandoned, the fire seemed to have died down and to burn less fiercely, although smoke still appeared, pouring up from around the engine-room.

A party volunteered to return to the ship to see if anything could be done. On board they discovered the fire was raging furiously and the mine decks were white-hot and buckling above the engine-room. They began to discharge some of the mines from the stern chutes but the heat and smoke forced them to abandon the vessel once more. They had scarcely cleared the Port Napier when two distinct explosions occurred which blew debris into the air. A moment or two later, there was another explosion and a huge column of smoke and flame shot skywards and mushroomed out, and spectators saw the vessel roll over to starboard and sink, until her starboard side rested on the bottom of the loch in seventy feet of water. She lay on a firm base of sand, her port side, or what was left of it, above water at low tide and the whole wreck, except for a few twisted frames, was submerged at high water.

Divers examined the wreck later and found that about one hundred and fifty feet of the fore part and two hundred feet of the aft part of the wreck's hull plating was reasonably intact, but the centre portion on the port side and decks above the engine-room was completely blown out for a distance of over one hundred feet and that the ship's back was broken. Salvage of the ship was impossible and the wreck was abandoned as a total loss. A beacon was erected on the site to mark her position, as she lay in a good anchorage not far from the main traffic route through Lochalsh.

Steel was in short supply, particularly later in the war years, and a firm of shipbreakers was given a contract to cut away and lift as much of the upper (port-side) armour and plating as could be economically reached at low water. The firm decided to remove the phosphor-bronze propellers which were of great value. The propellers were still fouled up with the cables of the collier and the diver working on the job made a decision to cut these cables using a small charge of explosive placed around them. He had reported that there was a mine lying on the bottom nearby but as it had been flooded, with the watertight cover removed, it was considered that it presented no danger.

Some precautions were taken and men and craft who were involved in the venture were removed to a distance from the wreck, thought to be safe as the charge was a small one. When the explosive charge was around the cables, it was fired up, but then there was a tremendous explosion which sank the diving-boat and damaged the salvage ship nearby. The mine had gone up and it was fortunate that others in the vicinity had not, otherwise a serious loss of life would have occurred. The salvage party refused to continue working on the wreck and the Port Napier was again abandoned.

In 1953, some adventurers aboard an ancient trawler decided to attempt removing the two propellers without blowing themselves to bits. They removed the screws without any casualties, but were unable to lift the propellers which each weighed around ten tons.

They were arrested on the job and duly prosecuted.

As a result of the talk on the Port Napier, Terry and Laila Hall, from The Dun Caan Hostel have donated pottery which was recovered from the wreck of the Port Napier 10 years ago by Terry's son Stephen Karl Hall and Matthew Baldwin, both from Weymouth in Dorset.

The society would like to thank them for this kind donation and these items will put on view at the next display



Now and Then:

Do you have old pictures of your house and do you know roughly when they were taken?

Can you take a picture of your house now – i.e. in 2011?

If so, can you let us have copies so that we can form a display of what the village used to be like and what it is like now?

The majority of the houses in the village have undergone some form of extensions/alterations, have you found anything unexpected that you think would be of interest to the Society?

And finally.....

Contact Information:

Caroline - carolineclouston@hotmail.com

Sue - suelyons2909@aol.com

Mike - mike@skye6.fsnet.co.uk

We're planning to be on the Web!

Watch this space for further details!



This was a day trip in 1938 to Portree, on the Lord of the Isles Bus

Does anyone have the name of the lady on far left? and then from left to right we have ? MacInnes, Murdo Montgomery (Monty the Tailor), Ruaridh MacRae (Rauch), Christine Robertson, Alec MacLean, Agnes Cameron and Peggy MacInnes

If you would like to join us, contact any of the committee for a membership form or fill in the details below:

Name:.....

Address:.....

.....

Post Code:.....

Email Address:.....

Date:.....

Annual membership rates:

Single membership - £10.00

Junior membership (under 18) - £5.00

Diary Dates

9th March
Talk - "Highland Medicine" by Dr John Adamson

13th April
Talk - "Recent Excavations at the High Pasture Cave" by Steven Birch

If any of you have any suggestions for talks, please contact any of the committee members.

Dates of other events taking place in the village can also be included in this section - please send the details to Sue.

Please send ideas for items/articles in the newsletter to any of the committee members.