



## **Summary of potential medium and long term plans for Groam House Museum**

### **Background – the storage problem**

In 2021, the museum celebrated 40 years in Groam House. The building was originally donated by local businessman, Mario Pagliari, to the then Fortrose Town Council for the use of the community. It was made available to display the collection of Pictish artefacts which were local to Rosemarkie. In 1989 Ross and Cromarty District Council offered a 25 year lease to the museum, and this was reassigned in 2008 after the Museum changed from being a Trust to being a company limited by guarantee.

From being primarily a centre for Pictish carved art, the museum ran an exhibition of the drawings of Scottish artist, George Bain in 1997. Following the success of this, the Bain family felt GHM would be a fitting place for his archive. With grants from various sources, including lottery funding, a major five-year programme of exhibitions and outreach projects across Scotland was undertaken in the mid-2000s. GHM was eventually awarded Recognition of the George Bain Collection as a Nationally Significant Collection by MGS in 2014. The collection is extensive – everything from carpets to teapots, from knitting patterns to handbags. It also contains Bain's sketches, hand-drawn bookplates, craftwork, carpets, leatherwork, woodwork, embroideries and ceramics. It is complemented by designs and objects produced by other members of 19th and 20th-century Celtic art revivals.

This significant collection of items, coupled with the existing Pictish collection and a collection of local artefacts, placed a heavy demand for storage on the museum, since Groam House itself was limited in size and could display only a small fraction of the total collection of the museum. At that time, the museum rented the former Millers Hotel at the top of Rosemarkie High Street for storage and office space. This was conveniently close to Groam House, and enabled volunteers and staff to access the collections easily and work on them. When this rented space became no longer available, accommodation was negotiated at the stable block on the Rosehaugh estate in Avoch, which is where our collection and office space are currently located. This accommodation was satisfactory in terms of space and security, but less so in terms of ease of access and distance from the museum.

Notice was received last year from the owners of the Rosehaugh estate that the stable block was due to be redeveloped at some point in the future, and that the Museum would need to vacate the space, probably within two years. Shortly after, notice was also received from Highlife Highland that another store currently used by the museum would be closing, and the museum would have to vacate that space also. There was therefore an urgent need to find a new location for the storage of the museum collections, and for working and office space to support the museum's work.

## Background – previous accommodation studies

Over the years, the limited accommodation offered by Groam House has been the subject of much study and debate. In 2007 a working group was established to review the accommodation options. It was at this time that the possibility of using part of the space within Rosemarkie Church was examined. Discussions with the Church authorities had made some progress, when structural issues at the Fortrose church became apparent, and as a result, the Rosemarkie church became more heavily used, and the option for sharing with Groam House Museum was no longer practicable.

At that time, the working group also had plans drawn up for a potential expansion of Groam House itself. The donor of the building, Mario Pagliari, offered to donate a further metre width of land to the front of Groam House, so as to accommodate an extension. The proposed development would have provided a two-storey extension to the front of Groam House, as well as opening up the attic space in both the existing building and the extension – in total a very significant increase in space.

However, the Council's Planning department advised that the proposed extension was unlikely to receive Planning Approval, on account of its size and impact on the neighbouring property.

A further study by museum specialists CMC in 2015 proposed a smaller-scale single-storey extension in the museum courtyard, and this was submitted for pre-planning advice which was more positive than previously. The Board of the museum then developed their thinking to consider making the extension largely of glass construction, and design it to house the Rosemarkie stone, to make it visible all year round.

At this time, too, the museum started active discussions with the Council regarding acquisition of the building, though little progress was made as the Council advised that its solicitors were busy with other property transfers.

The Council and the museum resumed discussions concerning the transfer in 2020, and it was finally completed on 16 March 2022 when ownership of Groam House transferred to the museum..

## Looking to the future

The Board of the museum has been considering options for the future almost from the beginning, and certainly from 2007 onwards. These have centred round the possible options:

- Extending the existing Groam House to provide more exhibition space, retaining other nearby accommodation for storage and workspace
- Extending the existing Groam House to provide more exhibition space, and opening up the attic space to provide some storage space; retain other nearby accommodation for additional storage and workspace
- Acquiring an existing building for conversion to museum exhibition space and for storage and workspace; retain Groam House as a Pictish Centre (given that its location matches that of the 9<sup>th</sup> century Pictish monastery)
- Creating a new-build purpose-made museum within the general area of Rosemarkie/Fortrose, for exhibition space, storage and workspace; retain Groam House as a Pictish Centre.

The museum has recently engaged the services of a museum consultant to carry out a visioning study for the future of the museum – to help us develop plans for the next ten years.

Current thinking is that the favoured option is for a new-build, probably in Fortrose, to tie in with other important tourist attractions – the cathedral and the dolphin-watching at Chanonry Point. The scope of the museum would also be extended, to cover more of the fascinating history of this part of the Black Isle. As an alternative, the museum would be looking to acquire an existing building suitable for exhibition space, storage, working and office space.

While all this is quite uncertain at present, the likely timescale of developments is as follows:

Year 1 (2022) – visioning study; work to identify and acquire property suitable for development to house the collections and provide workshop space for related conservation etc work, as well as for workshops and for training work with long-term unemployed and people with disability. (Mill Cottage is currently the main contender for this)

Year 2 – obtaining funding for the development of the acquired property and building work to complete the development; transfer of stored collections to new storage location

Years 3-5 – detailed development of future business plans including plans to acquire new building or to seek site for new build

Years 6-10 – acquisition of suitable premises, or completion of new build; transfer collections and exhibitions to new premises; Mill Cottage (or equivalent) no longer needed – proposed to revert to domestic use, offer at affordable rent locally and generate rental income for museum.

## **Timetable for Mill Cottage**

Assuming the museum is successful in its bid to acquire Mill Cottage, its plans for developing and using the property are in five phases:

Phase 1 – acquisition – taking ownership of the building; undertaking basic remedial work internally to make the property suitable for storage of the museum's collections and for related workshop activity and office space. The plan is to use what is now the bedroom as storage space, and the existing living room for office/working space. The internal work needed consists of minor adjustment to the internal partitioning to increase the size of the entrance area and reduce the toilet/bathroom size, checking and upgrading electrical wiring, fitting out an accessible toilet, checking out and making operational the heating system, general clearing work to the front and rear gardens and repair of fencing. Most of this work will be undertaken by volunteers/friends of the museum, with some input from tradespeople. Total cost is likely to be less than £10k.

Phase 2 – storage – use of the cottage with minimal enhancement as above, for the storage of the museum's collections and related items. While this is in progress, work will be undertaken to firm up on funding opportunities for the further development of the site, and to develop detailed architectural plans for the enlargement of the property and for any further changes to the interior.

Phase 3 – development – building the proposed extension to the rear of the property, with purpose-designed storage rack, environmental control and security systems; during this

time the museum collections will be housed in the existing part of the property, which will be sealed off from the building site while work is in progress.

Phase 4 – transfer of collections to the extension at the rear of the building; renovation of the current bedroom area to provide more workshop/office space.

Phase 5 – when other accommodation for the museum and storage becomes available, removal of the collections to the new site, restoration of Mill Cottage to a domestic property (now with the advantage of a workshop or lounge to the rear of the property), and offering the property for long term affordable rent.