**2022 President’s Report: *2nd April 2021 to 1st April 2022***

***2nd April 2021 Winter Talks.***

Our series of winter talks, organised by Fiona Gould and James Grieve, were a great

success. Speakers included Martyn Obbard on Polar Bears, Sara Wheeler on Arctic Travel and Ken McGoogan on the role of Indigenous people in Arctic Exploration: These talks raised £1,500, a real success!

***22nd June 2021Arctic Library.***

Mr John Ramwell kindly donated his lifetime's collection of around 400 Arctic books. Some of them are signed rarities. JRS is extremely grateful for his generous gesture. They are currently in safe storage at EMEC. These will form a valuable future library for Arctic researchers.

***The John Rae Challenges.***

The Fundraising Working Group had the idea of John Rae Challenges. Fiona Gould wrote her History of Clestrain, Bernie Bell maintained a period of silence, Liz Macinally a cycling challenge. Several other successful challenges, including sea swimming, a 'Kilt Walk'  and 'Rowing The North West Passage' were achieved; all raising funds and the profile of The John Rae Society

***Conservation plan.***

On the 1st June, our conservation plan went live.

***Archaeology.***

Our excavations were limited this year due to sudden other commitments of volunteers. However, they were redesigned to answer and ask several questions. The Hall of Clestrain seems to have been built in a vast building pit or terrace. We wanted to find the depth of this. We removed a section of the 1850’ drain. There was a considerable makeover of The Hall and grounds at that time. The retaining wall around the hall was erected then and the terracing filled in in front this wall.

A new Northern entrance with stone steps down to The Hall was built at the same time as the massive drain, which went along the north facade. Then the north courtyard was filled over and levelled to cover the drain. We wanted to establish the depth of the sequence of layers down to the original build. The large drain was built on a line of beautifully fashioned gutter stones. Behind them was a flag pathway, which led to the west corner and turned along the west gable. This pathway may well have gone all round the hall.

The stone gutter, we feel is of the circa1769 build and John Rae will have been familiar with it. The threshold he knew will have been very close to that level. To establish whether this drain feature was original to the site, we dug below its level by 16cm into layers of midden infill. This stone gulley drain must have been later than the original building of The Hall of Clestrain. We have more work to do to establish that date.

We examined the East wall of the West Pavilion by excavation. It showed the walls of the pavilion going deeper than previously imagined. After accurately recording the 1950's flagstone floor within, we removed half a broken slab and dug beneath. It was laid on shore shingle. Various sherds of Victorian and early 20th century pottery came to light in layers of midden beneath. We probed deep below with my special stick to a probable stone surface. This seems to be over two feet down.

It is certain that the north courtyard of The Hall of Clestrain looked very different in John Rae's time than it does now.

The Society is extremely grateful to Paul Johnson for directing the dig, and Gail Drinkall for dealing with the finds and of course all the other volunteers.

We had two open days where over eighty people visited and saw the excavations. Everyone enjoyed their experience, donated and some joined JRS.

***Edrington Trust.***

This trust owns Highland Park Distillery along with the Robertson Trust. Every year when Highland Park employees are not actively distilling, they do charitable works. This year we were so lucky, as the team had time to infill our excavations. They also cleaned out all the accrued pigeon guano from within The Hall from top to bottom. They removed the rubble from some partial demolition of the pig pens in the ground floor. They strimmed around the hall to make it tidy for the open days and also cleaned out the concrete shed we own. This has made it into an ideal storage space. The Society is immensely grateful to Highland Park.

***Activities.*** Activities were curtailed by the effects of the pandemic, so there were no Open Days until September, when we held two on the weekend of September 19th/20th. Visits had been made to view the archaeological work in July in strict observance of the rules of social distancing. Two non-fundraising events took place in September and December:

***Land Funds.***

The Cuminga Trust promised a further £2,500 donation towards the one acre of the additional land they purchased for JRS. This was to be given to us after a school programme to come up with suggestions of names for the acre. North Walls Primary School had borrowed the John Rae box and this inspired them to choose names, which the Cuminga trust is considering. They completed their payment.Julia Randall donated the final sum for our land purchase on the 16th March 2022, which JRS is extremely grateful indeed for.

***Continuing Plans.*** We had detailed discussions with Historic Environment Scotland about possible funding for the restoration of the Hall. Roof repairs were also carried out and the Hall was made safe for access by consultants. The public were consulted about descriptions of John Rae’s qualities, resulting in five descriptors (the John Rae Spirit) which will be linked to a challenge at a future date.

***30th September 2021 Graveside Ceremony.***

Our Lord Lieutenant, Elaine Grieve, gave a moving address to the company and the piper did so well in honouring John Rae. Libations were made as the attendees meditated.

***15th December 2021.*** Sir Mark Jones of The Pilgrim Trust visited us at The Hall of Clestrain. This resulted in the Pilgrim Trust awarding us a grant of £35k to support our projects Manager for a year. These funds were paid to us in early November 2022. The John Rae Society is immensely grateful for their support and generosity.

***John Rae Explorer Scouts.*** Again in December the John Rae Explorer Scouts were awarded their Explorer Badges by Norman Shearer. These were generously funded by Sir Michael Palin.

5th March. We are to be donated an 1850’s threshing machine from Claudia Barwell. This will be stored in the west pavilion.

16th March. Regrettably James Grieve and Mark Newton both resigned on health grounds. Tracey Philips was co-opted as a Trustee

***Highland Park*** had planned the launch of its John Rae Explorer whisky for March, but this had to be postponed until the summer. The board of trustees was, however, extensively involved in the accompanying display and produced three handsome, illustrated boards depicting the timeline of John Rae’s life. This whisky edition sold out in four weeks at £125 a bottle. Our society is to receive a most welcome £5k donation as a result!

***Membership.*** Membership, at the end of the financial year, was 414, although there were a number of payments outstanding. 30% of the membership is within Orkney, 54% in the rest of the UK and 16% overseas. Members continued to be supportive, and we received donations of £1000, £5000 and £4800. The last donation enabled us to pay the amount owing on land purchased for the road to the Hall and was given specifically for this.

In all, this has been an extremely successful year with steady, if gradual progress towards the restoration of The Hall of Clestrain.

Andrew J Appleby.

President of The John Rae Society.