

## *Around the Archives*

# **The Royal Highland and Agricultural Society of Scotland Archive: Past, Present and Future**

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The Royal Highland and Agricultural Society of Scotland (RHASS) is known mainly for its contribution to the protection and advancement of agriculture within Scotland, be this through farming or rural industry. The Society's main audience is the 'people who value the rural areas of Scotland' and 'everyone who supports the very best standards in agriculture, forestry and stewardship of the countryside'.<sup>1</sup> The emphasis is also on the heritage of Scotland as well as education of the younger generations to allow them to maintain and protect the countryside. The RHASS has many facilities which allows it to achieve its aim of protection such as its annual Royal Highland Show. In addition to this, the work of the Royal Highland Education Trust (RHET) interacts with children in order to teach them about the importance of their countryside and how it affects their everyday lives. However, there is also another facility available within the Society's headquarters at Ingliston House in Edinburgh (Plate 1), that of an archive and library. This facility is not widely known but staff and volunteers are currently trying to improve public knowledge about it due to its importance in the field of agriculture through the ages. Many researchers view the collection as an invaluable source, holding much information which cannot be found anywhere else. It is the job for staff members to develop this resource, make it available to all and protect it for the future.

The RHASS has a long and illustrious past. It was originally formed in 1784 but other societies that can be seen as its precursors actually precede this date. During the early eighteenth century there was a need in the UK for a group that would look out for agriculture and the advancement of Scottish agriculture in particular. Farming and rural issues came to the fore with the identification of a need to protect and use the countryside to its full potential. This came in the form of the 'Honourable Society of Improvers in the Knowledge of Agriculture in Scotland' which was formed in 1723.<sup>2</sup> This

<sup>1</sup> Royal Highland and Agricultural Society of Scotland, <https://rhass.org.uk/what-we-do/>.

<sup>2</sup> J. Davidson, *The Royal Highland & Agricultural Society of Scotland: A Short History 1784-1984* (Edinburgh, 1984), 1.

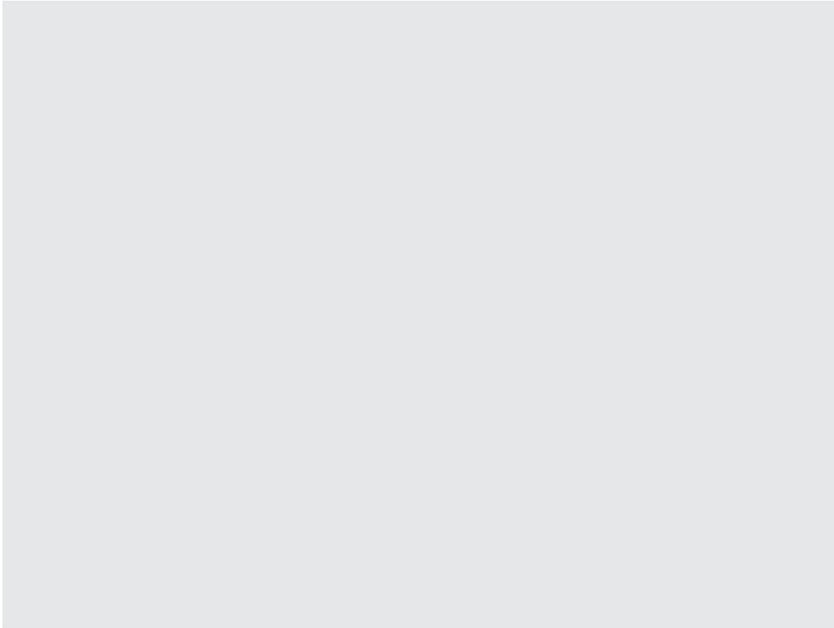


Plate 1 Ingliston House, the headquarters of the RHASS.

group encouraged landowners to report on the practices they used on their land in order for the Society to give advice for improvements. Topics advised upon included animal husbandry, crops, gardens and fishing.<sup>3</sup>

RHASS did not begin as the large, prestigious organisation that it is now, but rather in more relaxed circumstances. A group of gentlemen from the Highlands were asked to attend a meeting at Fortune's Tontine Tavern on the Royal Mile in Edinburgh on 9 February 1784.<sup>4</sup> From this meeting was born the Highland Society of Edinburgh. The attendees agreed on the need for an institution that would look after the prospects of the Highlands, and after a President, Vice-President and Committee were appointed, a circular letter was sent to possible members with the majority accepting to join the institution.<sup>5</sup>

A further General Meeting was held on 11 January 1785 where a set of Regulations was created which included the aims and rules of the Society. These were:

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>5</sup> H. MacKenzie, *Prize Essays and Transactions of the Highland Society of Scotland*, I (Edinburgh, 1799), ii.

1. An inquiry into the present state of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, and the condition of their inhabitants.
2. An inquiry into the means of their improvement, by establishing towns and villages – by facilitating communication through different parts of the Highlands of Scotland, by roads and bridges – advancing agriculture – and extending fisheries – introducing useful trades and manufacturers – and by an exertion to unite the efforts of the proprietors, and call the attention of Government towards the encouragement and prosecution of these beneficial purposes.
3. The Society shall also pay a proper attention to the preservation of the language, poetry and music of the Highlands.<sup>6</sup>

Added to this, there were also regulations for members. For example, there were to be two types of member, ‘Ordinary’ and ‘Corresponding’, the difference between these two being the amount of money to be paid. Ordinary members were to be charged annually ‘One Guinea towards the general fund of the Society, and Half-a-Crown towards payment of small salaries and incidental expences’.<sup>7</sup> In contrast, Corresponding members were to be free of charge but would only be able to vote once they became an Ordinary member.

In 1787, a Charter of Royal incorporation was sought. This was to impart stability to the organisation, erecting it ‘into one body politic and corporate’ under the name and title of ‘The Highland Society of Scotland at Edinburgh’. This was the first of a few charters, the last one being in 1960 which broadened the Society’s powers of investment and development.

Perhaps the most identifiable aspect of the present-day RHASS is that of the annual Royal Highland Show. The first official show occurred in 1822 before the term ‘royal’ had been granted to the Society. Before that date there had been competitions and exhibitions of livestock where prizes were awarded but it was felt that a fixed date for an annual show would be welcomed by all members. The idea of these agricultural shows was to provide a forum from which farmers and others interested in agriculture could share ideas for improvement, provide demonstrations and display their animals and produce.

It was thought that an annual show could bring many advantages not just to the Society but also to the farming community. It could provide a basis for getting ‘amateurs’ involved in agriculture as well as improving the breeding of stock. This in turn would benefit cities like Edinburgh where products, such as meat, would be considerably improved. Originally, the shows were to be held in December when, it was decided, most people involved in agriculture, such as the Society members, would be present in Edinburgh.<sup>8</sup> This would eventually change to it being held in the summer months.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., iii.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., iii.

<sup>8</sup> Davidson, *The Royal Highland & Agricultural Society of Scotland*, 26.

It was not until 1948 that King George VI conferred the title ‘royal’ on the Society. This demonstrated the importance of not just the Society but also the shows up to this point. It led to a name change to include the new moniker and boosted the influence of the Society. Up until this point there had been a show annually, not including the years of the First and Second World Wars, which had toured Scotland. This allowed for the inclusion of the entire agricultural community and contributed to the success of the shows.

However, it was decided in the late 1950s that a permanent location needed to be found. This was due to a variety of problems involved in having a moving show, such as weather and site restrictions which resulted in the event losing money. In 1958, therefore, a golf course and adjoining farm were bought at Ingliston on the outskirts of Edinburgh for £55,000.<sup>9</sup> It took a couple of years to develop the site but the first show was held at Ingliston in 1960 with a total of 98,008 admissions.<sup>10</sup> From there on, the show only grew in both size and popularity to become the Royal Highland Show we know today.

The library at RHASS has always contributed to the overall importance and continuing presence of the Society. There is good access to the resource not just for members of RHASS but also for the general public. This is also true for the archive which receives many enquiries throughout the year into the documents it holds. It is estimated that the library holds about 5,000 books as well as pamphlet material that is difficult to quantify. Added to this, the archive material occupies three rooms within Ingliston House. Currently the library is unable to lend out items as books are not to be taken out of the building. However, there is plenty of study room made available on request to allow visitors to peruse the books and archive material.

The archive and library mainly have four types of people who use them. These can be narrowed down to, first, Society members who may be interested in anything from development in breeding techniques to the history of the Society itself. Second, there are those who are interested in family research and genealogy. Through our *Transactions* and show catalogues it is possible to trace people from as far back as the 1780s. A third category is that of students and academics who may be carrying out research for their own projects and finally any other organisations, be they agriculturally based or not.

As previously mentioned, the archive and library hold significant records which not only relate to the foundation and development of the Society, but also to wider historical events affecting agriculture. There are many administration files which include minutes of meetings, legal correspondence and lists of members. Among these there are gems of information such as the great seal charters of incorporation and the documents related to buying the land at Ingliston. Further to this there are accounts dating back to the creation of the Society as well as show catalogues, lists of competition prizewinners, medals

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 57.

and stock lists. This allows relatives of Society members to trace their ancestors back through the ages, for example, by discovering if someone in their family was awarded a medal or prize. It also helps to determine the status of farming in any particular time period and geographical area due to the reports the *Transactions* contain, such as weather conditions and whether or not different types of crops grew successfully.

Perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of the archive are the documents relating to St Kilda which include correspondence, photographs, minutes of the relief fund and information relating to the St Kilda bequest.

Another significant area of the collection is the material relating to the compilation of a Gaelic dictionary. The 1807 volume of the Society's *Transactions* states:

One of the original objects of the Society was the literature and antiquities of the Highlands, for the preservation and illustration of which, an attention to the Gaelic language is absolutely necessary. The Society appointed a committee for the purpose of assisting and forwarding the compilation of a Gaelic dictionary.

This material is often the subject of many enquiries that the Society receives and has been viewed numerous times by visitors.

It has been highlighted that the archive and library contain important historical information, a resource that cannot be found elsewhere, but let us look at this in more detail. There are many historic figures who have contributed to the ability of the Society to be an enduring and beneficial group. One such figure is Sir John Sinclair (1754–1835), the prominent agriculturalist who dedicated his life to the improvement of agriculture as well as raising awareness of agricultural issues in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Sinclair was a well-known politician, whose compilation of the *Statistical Accounts of Scotland* was a pioneering feat. Through working his own land, he was able to trial many agricultural techniques, perhaps the most famous of these being the introduction of Cheviot sheep to Caithness and Sutherland. A full copy of the *Statistical Accounts* can be found within the library and cover a variety of topics but mainly the advancement in agricultural technology as well as an in-depth description of the agricultural areas of Scotland by geographic location.

Another prominent figure whose work is included in the archive is that of Gourlay Steell (1819–94), a nineteenth-century artist. A notable Scottish individual, his works included models and paintings of animals. In the mid-nineteenth century Steell was appointed the official animal painter of the Society with the idea to keep a record of those animals which demonstrated the best in their breed.<sup>11</sup> Steell then went on in the 1870s to become Queen Victoria's animal painter in Scotland which reinforced his importance in the artistic world.<sup>12</sup> Examples of his work can be seen throughout Ingliston House

<sup>11</sup> E. Moncrieff, S. Joseph and I. Joseph, *Farm Animal Portraits* (Woodbridge, 1996), 108.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

and the archive includes original letters from the correspondence between Gourlay Steell and Queen Victoria.

James Oliver (1823–1908) is another well-known figure. He was an inventor born in Liddesdale, Scotland, who then emigrated to the USA. Oliver moved to Indiana where he became a partner in a foundry business. Initially he used what was known as the ‘improved plough’ in order to prepare his land but experienced two main problems. The first of these was that he often hit large rocks which would dent and break the ploughs which were expensive to replace. The second problem was that the muddy ground would often block up the plough causing the user to have to stop and clean it during use. Oliver felt that he would be able to solve these issues and set about inventing what would become the ‘Oliver Chilled Plow’. The information concerning James Oliver came to light due to an enquiry from a member of the public who was doing personal research. It was discovered that Oliver had brought some of his inventions over from America to be seen during the Society’s shows in 1885 and 1886. Using the show catalogues, the enquirer was able to find out that a company called Wallace & Sons displayed the Oliver Chilled Plow during shows in both Edinburgh and Aberdeen. There were about five ploughs on offer which were to be sold at highly competitive rates of £3 15s. or about \$20 when converted.

When looking into important figures that contribute, both in the past and in the present day, to the progression of the Royal Highland and Agricultural Society of Scotland, there must be some mention of the Royal Family. This support began during the reign of Queen Victoria (1837–1901) in the late nineteenth century.<sup>13</sup> Through the use of the *Transactions*, it can be seen that Queen Victoria was asked to become an honorary member of the Society in 1872 by Sir James Gardiner Baird, the Chairman at that time.<sup>14</sup> The Queen and his Late Royal Highness the Prince Consort were both very interested in agriculture and had a home farm of their own in Windsor. However, the Queen decided that if she was going to become a member then she should be a full member of the Society, not just by title. This was accepted by the Society and by 1873 the Prince of Wales had become president of the Society. This royal support continued with several of the family becoming involved as either patrons of the Society or as members: George V became a patron in 1930 and in 1964 Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother became the Royal President of the Society.<sup>15</sup> The Royal Family are also often frequent visitors to the Royal Highland Show where they present awards and prizes. There have been at least 28 occasions of a royal visit between 1859 and 1981.<sup>16</sup> These include the visit

<sup>13</sup> Encyclopaedia Britannica, <http://www.britannica.com/biography/Victoria-queen-of-United-Kingdom>.

<sup>14</sup> *Transactions of the Highland and Agricultural Society of Scotland*, 4th series (Edinburgh, 1872), 37.

<sup>15</sup> Davidson, *The Royal Highland & Agricultural Society of Scotland*, 54.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

by HRH The Princess Margaret, Countess of Snowdon in 1981 who presented the Queen's Cup.<sup>17</sup>

Other works of interest found within the archive include information on the first invention of the propeller, information on St Kilda as previously mentioned and the development of what is now known as the Royal (Dick) School of Veterinary Studies through the work of William Dick (1793–1866). The material on the veterinary school includes original letters between the Society and William Dick. This material is currently being properly logged and catalogued, and hopefully will eventually be digitised and made available online. This is a totally unique resource, unavailable elsewhere.

A move to increase accessibility to important documents held by the Society led to the digitisation of half of the Society's *Transactions*, from 1799 to 1885. This was only possible through Heritage Lottery Funding and more recently RHASS was given the go-ahead to complete the digitisation of the collection by making available the *Transactions* from 1886 to 1968. This was completed by the summer of 2016 and allows anyone to access them from the Society's website.<sup>18</sup> The *Transactions* are records of the principal proceedings of the Society from its inception until 1968 and include essays on aspects of agriculture from irrigation and crops to animal diseases, and lists of members and directors of the Society.

In October of 2015, the Society's archive was highlighted through *The Fountainbridge Show*, a local programme on Scottish television. It featured Stephen Hutt, the then Chief Executive of the RHASS, discussing some of the material found in the archive. These included the original documents for the purchase of Ingliston House as well as posters used to advertise the Royal Highland Show. A useful tool was created to do this in the form of a timeline of the Society, from inception to the present day, created as an exhibition by the Society President. This highlighted many important historical events ranging from the two World Wars to the outbreak of serious diseases that affected livestock such as foot-and-mouth.

For a Society which prides itself on its ability to contribute to the protection of Scotland's agricultural and rural heritage, as well as its ability to get people to interact with the countryside in a positive way, it is always important to think of the future and the development of programmes to ensure that the importance of agriculture is demonstrated to all. The first development will be to reach a wider audience. While currently there are several groups of people, such as researchers, who are aware of the existence of the archive, there needs to be outreach programmes to other areas, such as education. The archive and library could host groups of schoolchildren, be this through interactive workshops or trips to find information in the library. Programmes could be created which revolve around showing children the links between their lives

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>18</sup> *Transactions* available at: <http://archive.rhass.org.uk>.

and the rural community. This would hopefully inspire them in their futures as well as instil in them the importance of our countryside.

As well as the *Transactions*, the library holds a comprehensive book and periodical collection covering the history of Scottish agriculture and its practice. An online presence for the library and archive is necessary to open the scope of the collection to a wider audience. As part of the Library Development plan, the library stock is being catalogued and entered on a database which has recently gone live.<sup>19</sup> The RHASS Librarian has also initiated three projects which are being carried out with the assistance of volunteers with the aim of ultimately making them available on the Society's website. These are:

- Cataloguing of the extensive photograph and slide collection
- Cataloguing and digitising material relating to the establishment of the Royal (Dick) School of Veterinary Science
- Cataloguing and digitising of material relating to the compilation of a Gaelic dictionary.

Each of these projects contains material unique to RHASS. At the moment they are in the early stages and will ultimately involve seeking external funding and possible partnership working. In these ways the unique resources of the RHASS will be available to a greater number of people.

<sup>19</sup> <https://rhass.soutron.net/Portal/Default/en-GB/Search/SimpleSearch>.