

50 YEARS OF

THE DINGWALL MUSEUM

THE DINGWALL TOWN COUNCIL

The museum started as a collection of objects made by the Dingwall Town Council. The council operated in the Dingwall Town House from 1733 to 1975. During the World Wars, many of the artefacts went into storage. The place where they were stored sadly suffered a fire, greatly reducing the collection. However, after WWII, the collection did return to the Town House.



DINGWALL MUSEUM OPENING CEREMONY

The Dingwall Museum is now fully laid out.

The OFFICIAL OPENING CEREMONY by MR W. S. FOWLIE, Chairman of the Ross and Cromarty Heritage Society, will take place on TUESDAY first, 15th JULY, at 7.30 p.m.

A cordial invitation is extended to all interested to attend.

The Museum is situated in the Upper Rooms of Dingwall Town House.

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OPENING

Following the dissolution of the Dingwall Town Council, arrangements were put in place to transfer the collection of historical objects to the new Dingwall Museum Trust. This trust was run by a board of volunteer trustees from the local burgh.

The museum opened on the 15th of July 1975 with a special event to which the Trust invited any interested members of the public. It was officially opened by Mr W. Steven Fowlie, local district councillor and chairman of the Ross-shire Heritage Society, who was also instrumental in the setting up of the museum.

In the month following the opening of the new museum, there were over 2,000 visitors.

1970S

The museum existed on the first floor of the Town House, in what was previously the Burgh Court Room, the Provost's Room and the Council Chambers.

The museum started to hold special temporary exhibitions. In 1978, there were exhibitions on newspapers and writing, as well as Victorian and Edwardian dress and accessories.

In 1979, the museum suffered a break-in. Fortunately, the only item stolen was the collection box which only contained a few pence as it had recently been banked.

By the end of the decade, thanks to the generous donations of items, the museum space was becoming restricted. An enquiry was made to see if it would be possible to use another room in the Town Hall.



DINGWALL MUSEUM IN THE 1980S

The 80s were a time of great change in the museum. In 1985, the logo that is still used for the museum was created, and an admission charge of 30p for adults and 15p for children was introduced. In 1987, it was decided that those living outside the burgh of Dingwall could be accepted as members. During this decade, the museum began hosting lectures, creating booklets containing information on local history and became a tourist information point for a time. The Trust also hosted the first of its special events, which were known as the "Hobbies Fairs". However, the biggest change that happened in the museum in the 80s was the move from the upstairs of the Town House to the downstairs.



The Kitchen



The Press Room

RENOVATIONS

This move began in 1980, when a meeting was held between the Leisure and Recreation Sub-Committee and the Dingwall Museum Trust. During the meeting, Leisure and Recreation expressed a wish to use some of the first-floor rooms in the Town House as dressing rooms for those using the hall for performances. After much discussion, it was decided that the old courtroom and Provost's room would be converted into dressing rooms, while the museum would retain the Council Chambers and gain the ground floor rooms, which are currently in use. This move took place over two years, during which the museum was closed for renovations. The rooms downstairs during the 80s were used as the Military Room, the Press Room (now office), the entrance/foyer, the Smiddy/Kitchen and the Dingwall Room.

THE FIRST HOBBIES FAIR

In 1987, the museum hosted its first "Hobbies Fair" in which local people were invited to display their personal hobbies and learn about the hobbies of others. The fair was opened by Jock Watt, Director of Leisure and Recreation, and proved to be both a financial and publicity success for the museum.



DINGWALL MUSEUM IN THE 1990S



THE HOBBIES FAIRS CONTINUE

The museum continued to run The Hobbies Fair in conjunction with the Dingwall Fire Brigade Club in the 90s, and it continued to be popular. The event ran in 1991, 1993, 1995 and 1997. In 1993, it was recorded that the fair attracted around 1,200 people.

A ROYAL VISIT

During the 1991 Dingwall Mod Week, then-Prince Charles visited the town. According to those who showed him round the museum, he "expressed enjoyment at the exhibitions mounted within the Council Chambers and in the trophy room" - referring to a special exhibition of Mod trophies.



FILM & VIDEO

In the 90s, film creation was becoming more accessible, and the museum entered into the audio-visual (AV) world. In 1990, the museum collaborated with the Dingwall Camera Club to produce an AV archive. The following year, a video player was purchased along with two video tapes – one about local residents and their memories of Dingwall in the past, and the other about Sir Hector MacDonald. In 1993, the Camera Club made a video about Dingwall and its people, which was added to the archive. The creation of these films led to a wish to share them with the public, and the museum needed a space to do this.



RENOVATIONS

Various refurbishments were undertaken in this decade. The small press room was converted into an office space in 1990, before becoming a video/reading room in 1994. This room was fitted with a 24" TV monitor and a video tape player. The Military Room was reduced in size to accommodate a new, smaller office. The ground floor of Eagle House, which had previously been a chemist's shop, became the new entrance and shop area, as it is today.

DINGWALL MUSEUM IN THE 1990S

EAGLE COURT

A major project the museum completed in the 90s was the refurbishment of Eagle Court – the outside space accessible from the gift shop. When the Trust took over the space, it was litter-filled, graffiti-covered and overgrown. Starting in 1996, museum volunteers worked hard to turn it into a pleasant space that added to the High Street of the town. The rejuvenation was completed in 1998 at a cost of approximately £19,500. The new courtyard was opened with a ceremony that included a concert by pupils of Feis Rois. The courtyard went on to be used for spinning demonstrations and tuition, playing draughts on the large painted draughts board, and hosting other musical open days.



Above: Eagle Court before
Below: opening ceremony



THE MACRAE ROOM

The small building in the courtyard – now the MacRae Room, named after the ex-provost of Dingwall – had been in a derelict state before the refurbishment of the courtyard. This building was also refurbished to be used as an educational space.



DINGWALL MUSEUM IN THE 2000S

HEIGHTS OF BRAE GOLD HOARD

In the year 2000, the museum hosted its most popular special exhibition to date – The Heights of Brae Gold Hoard. The hoard, which consisted mainly of cup-ended dress fasteners and penannular bracelets, was first discovered on a croft two miles from the centre of Dingwall in 1979. The Dingwall-area resident who had found two pieces of the gold took them to the National Museum of Scotland, where they were identified as being from the Bronze Age and nearly 3000 years old. When archaeologists investigated the area, they found another seven gold pieces from the same time period. This was the largest surviving gold hoard found in Scotland at the time. Using grant money from the Heritage Lottery Fund and local councillors, along with their own fundraising efforts, the museum transformed the MacRae building in Eagle Court into a special exhibition room with increased security. The gold hoard was loaned to the Dingwall Museum by the National Museum of Scotland for one month and its exhibition here was visited by 6,248 people. Borrowing items of such high value for an exhibition by a museum of this size was considered “a first” in Scotland.



THE MERCAT CROSS

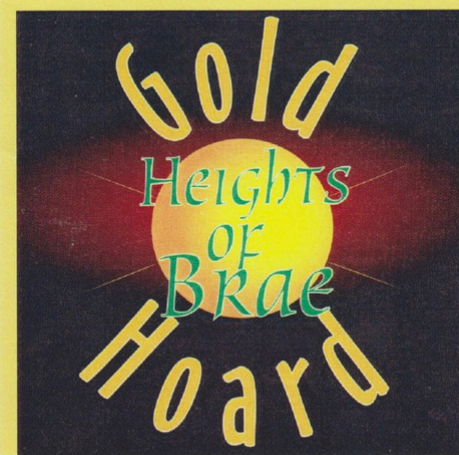
Much discussion had been had over the future of the town's Mercat Cross, as it suffered damage from weathering and vandalism while it stood on the High Street. In 2003, it was taken for repairs, and in 2004, it was moved into the museum where it stands today. To do this, it had to be lifted in through the window in Eagle House.



DINGWALL MUSEUM
TRUST

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REFURBISHMENTS

In 2003, the Military Room was refurbished to be more accessible to those with disabilities. The Council Chambers, which had over the years become a space for exhibitions, were returned to their original purpose of recreating the room as it would have been while used by the Dingwall Town Council. Following a trip to Fort George, some members of the board had found some dummies which the fort was going to throw away, and were given permission to undertake a recycling venture, taking the dummies back to the museum. The dummies were dressed to resemble the members of the final town council and sat around the original table as if in session.

DINGWALL MUSEUM IN THE 2010S AND PRESENT DAY

DIGITAL AGE

During the 21st Century, the world has become much more digital, and the Museum Trust has followed suit. The museum digitised its records of the items in its collection which had previously been on paper. This shift can also be seen in the way the museum handled enquiries. In the year 2000, it is recorded that "316 items – mainly photographs – were acquired; 273 items of mail despatched", while in 2009, 546 enquiries were answered by phone or email. In 2012, the Museum Trust began work to create their own website.



Old museum website as it was in 2021

During the COVID-19 pandemic, like many other institutions, the museum had to close its doors. Following this, volunteers gradually returned to working on documenting the collection and reopened it to the public.

In the present day, the museum is run by volunteers, with a museum specialist employed for one day a fortnight to help with the current audit of the collection. The museum has expanded into the world of social media with a Facebook and Instagram page, as well as updating the website. A project has just been undertaken to recruit and retain young volunteers, which has brought a new generation behind the scenes here. We are currently running a book club, workshops on heritage and the arts to mark the 50th anniversary, a 'Picture Detectives' project - where local people are invited to see if they can help identify people and places in photos in our collection, and an outreach program where museum volunteers visit local places, taking relevant items in our collection to be viewed and discussed by the residents. The museum continues to run thanks to the support of the public.



Exhibition by Saffron Wittka-Jezewski, with thanks to Ian Macleod, Jonathan McColl and Anne MacInnes for their assistance in its creation.

August 2025