

THE REORGANISATION OF ROTHESAY MUSEUM

By M. E. and J. G. SCOTT

The reorganisation of the Rothesay Museum, which was reopened in March, 1951, was made possible by a generous grant from the Carnegie United Kingdom Trust. Dr. D. A. Allan, Director of the Royal Scottish Museum, provided technical advice on the general plan of the scheme and the way in which the grant was to be allocated, and gave help and encouragement in many ways. Miss D. N. Marshall, Honorary Curator, whose extensive knowledge of Bute is well-known, supplied a fund of information and introduced us to the archaeology and natural history of the island.

There has been a museum in Rothesay since 1872; it has had a chequered career and various abodes before reaching its present building, the headquarters of the Buteshire Natural History Society. That Society, founded in 1903, reopened the museum in 1906, largely through the efforts of Dr. William Macewen, the distinguished Glasgow surgeon and of Dr. J. N. Marshall, who took the closest interest in the society and museum throughout his life. The present building was erected in 1926 by the late Marquess of Bute, who handed it over to the society with a capital sum for its upkeep. The late Marquess, moreover, was an antiquarian of note, whilst the present Lord Bute's interest in ornithology is well-known. Rothesay Museum then, is almost unique in that it is a building specifically designed to be at once a museum and the headquarters of the local society.

The society does not confine itself to natural history but includes archaeology and history within its scope. Miss D. N. Marshall brought out an excellent guide, entitled "the History of Bute," which

linked the history of the island with the specimens shown in the museum. The society has consistently had the courage to refuse to accept specimens not associated with Bute. The collection, therefore, was adequate, without many additions, for the purpose of a regional museum for Bute. No one, however, could have been more conscious of the need of rearrangement than the Rothesay people themselves.

The room to the left of the entrance hall contained a large collection of local birds in modern, metal-framed cases with plate glass sides. The cases stood in the centre of the room. The birds were, almost without exception, well mounted, but there were many duplicates and it was found that the roof lighting had caused a good deal of fading. Amongst the birds was an interesting series of migratory birds collected over a period of years at Pladda Lighthouse. There was also a good collection of birds' eggs, many with nests, as well as a display of birds' pellets which might well have been welcomed in a larger museum. There were few mammals, housed mostly in small independent cases, into which moths had found their way, with unfortunate results. There were also some plaster casts of fish.

The immediate problem was to get rid of overcrowding, both of cases and of specimens. The metal-framed cases were retained and used to display birds. The cases were ranged along the walls, where they no longer dominated the room and were less exposed to direct sunlight. The bottom half of one of the cases was painted on the inside of the glass, so that it could be used to store duplicates and faded specimens. The bird stands, the shelves and the backs of the cases were distempered a uniform pale green, and pale green labels were used. A special case on bird migration was prepared, making use of the birds collected at Pladda Lighthouse.

The existing desk cases were found to be unsuit-

able, as they were provided with window glass, which, besides being a distorting medium, was liable to be cracked by members of the public. Fortunately it proved possible to do away with these cases almost entirely, the Royal Scottish Museum generously providing, on indefinite loan, a series of desk cases and small central cases. The latter were used to house small mammals, reptiles and amphibia and shore birds, and were ranged down the centre of the room. The reptiles and amphibia were casts specially made, the mammals, too, were new, most of the original ones having to be destroyed.

A desk case of insects was arranged to show moths, butterflies and other insects in three groups, mounted on pieces of linoleum cut into irregular shapes and distempered. The moths and butterflies were presented by the late Dr. Paul of Millport, the beetles by Glasgow Museum.

It was felt that an island museum should have a section devoted to the sea and seashore life. One desk case was used to show crabs and other crustacea, starfish and sea urchins, all dried, painted in their natural colours and arranged upon a sandy background. Similarly, painted plaster casts of fish were arranged in an adjoining case, the flatfish shown buried in sand, others, such as the mackerel, on almost invisible wire supports.

A desk case of shells of the seashore, with the shells arranged on strips of hardboard, each strip painted a different colour from the others, showed the various zones in which the shells live, from high water to low water mark.

The natural history section, with the exception of geology, was completed by providing a plant table, a feature which had already been introduced by members of the society.

The entrance hall had formerly contained a

selection of querns and knocking stones as well as a large cross slab from St. Mary's Chapel. It was decided that these should be moved out, as they tended to collect dust — indeed it was made a principle as far as possible to keep specimens off the floor, so as to render cleaning of the building easier.

The room to the right of the entrance hall was devoted to the geology, archaeology and history of Bute. The immediate problem here was the need for new cases. The existing ones were nearly all desk cases, many of them in poor condition and fitted with window instead of plate glass. The forest of legs was distracting and there were only two upright cases to relieve the monotony and to attract the eye.

The Royal Scottish Museum again magnificently solved the problem by providing six large display cases fitted with plate glass, and two shallow upright cases, all of which were arranged round the walls and used for archaeology and history.

About one third of the room was devoted to the geology of Bute, the specimens already collected by the society proving quite adequate for a satisfactory display. An existing relief map of the island, with geological features marked, was mounted on a special stand in the centre of this section.

The archaeological material was both comprehensive and important. One of the few known inhabited neolithic sites in Scotland is at Townhead, Rothesay, and the relics from this site, which was excavated for the society by Dr. J. N. Marshall, formed an impressive display. Bronze Age relics were less abundant. An important Early Bronze Age burial, with a food vessel and a jet necklace, was found many years ago at Mountstuart, but the relics are now in the National Museum of Antiquities in Edinburgh. However, through the kindness of Mr R. B. K. Stevenson, details of the necklace were supplied and it

proved possible to make a copy of it for the Rothesay Museum.

Relics of the Early Iron Age were especially numerous and varied, derived mainly from the society's excavation of the vitrified fort at Dunagoil. These objects occupied two cases, while early Christian relics were placed in another, together with a model of St. Blane's Chapel, Bute, made in the Museum at Glasgow.

The backgrounds of the archaeological cases were painted so that each period represented had a colour of its own. In all of them outline maps of Bute played an important part, showing the known sites of the period and giving the changing pattern of life in the island from age to age. Together, the archaeological cases form a series illustrating the story of life in Bute from New Stone Age times, about 4,000 years ago, to the Middle Ages.

Later historical relics were accommodated in two wall cases provided by the Royal Scottish Museum and in desk cases arranged in a group in the centre of the room. The penny-farthing bicycle resisted the resources even of the Royal Scottish Museum to encase it, and had to be fastened to the floor and supported against a wall. Most other objects not in cases were, however, raised off the floor: the querns and knocking stones together on a stand of their own, the cross slab, too, on a stand, both stands being specially made. The cost was met by the Carnegie grant.

Professional joiners were engaged to make special cores and stands and to box in the lower part of the desk cases, which also provided storage space. When the display was completed, there were sufficient funds left from the grant to pay for the painting of the cases. A warm grey colour was chosen, with kicking boards of dark brown.

THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS OF ROTHESAY TO THE PASSING OF THE EDUCATION ACT, 1872

- (a) the Parochial Schools.
- (b) the schools under The Education (Scotland) Act, 1872.

[Read 19th October, 1954]

By ROBERT D. WHYTE, J.P.

The information to be obtained with regard to the early schools in Rothesay is extremely meagre; the local historians ignore them and, while some information may be got from the local Municipal and Church Records, these are in many respects very defective.

There seems to have been a school in Rothesay between 1557 and 1634, and probably the Town Council made payments towards it, but beyond the mere mention of it in Grant's "Burgh Schools,"* nothing more is known of this school.

From the Kingarth Kirk Session records we know that in 1649 there was one school in Rothesay which served for the whole island and that John McGilchrist was the Teacher, but there our information regarding this school ends.

From the Town Council Minutes we learn that Donald McGilchrist, the Town Clerk, was also Parochial Teacher. He was appointed on 15th May, 1655 to hold office for one year, but apparently he held office till 31st December, 1656, for on 1st January, 1657 he was succeeded by James Stewart, who was only one year in office and was succeeded by Rev. Robert Stewart of Scarrell, a son of the Parish Minister of Rothesay, who

*History of the Burgh Schools of Scotland p. 460-1