

Bute Museum: a short history of the buildings and collections

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The Bute museum collection has, since 1926, been housed in the building in Stuart Street which was built specifically for the purpose. However, the Stuart Street building was not the first on the island to be called the Museum.

In 1872 the Archaeological and Physical Society of Bute was formed with these specific aims:

to investigate and record the Antiquities and Physical History of the County of Bute, and to form a Museum and Library bearing the objects of the Society and on Antiquities and Natural history in General.

The first home for the Museum was Chapelhill House, which was leased from the Town council in 1873. This building, which is now a dwelling house, is situated opposite Rothesay Academy. The original collection is recorded in the acquisitions book, which is still in current use. At that time curios and objects of interest were as numerous as items pertaining to Bute. Sea captains and their wives often donated ethnographic items to the collection. The first entry, made on November 15 1872 was *Mustela erminea*, the common stoat, shot at Ascog lochside by Mr Henry Stephenson of Craigmore. There follows a list of natural history specimens from Bute interspersed with entries such as mosaic work from the Palace in Delhi (taken during the Sepoy War), tigers' teeth from Old Calabar, a Chinese crossbow and arrows, a shell worn by a Sandwich Island chief and snakes from Surinam.

By the turn of the century interest in the society had waned but a committee was formed which continued to take care of the museum and its collections. In 1905 the Museum Committee of the Archaeological and Physical Society invited local gentlemen to a meeting chaired by Sir William McEwen of South Garrochty. As a result of this meeting the Buteshire Natural History Society was formed.

In 1907 the collections formerly housed at the Chapelhill Museum were handed over to the Marquess of Bute, who had acquired the Aquarium in Battery Place for the purpose of a museum. The Marquess was said to have added largely to the collections and to have made great improvements to the Aquarium building entirely at his own cost. He also paid the salaries of three curators who carried out research work as well as adding to the collections. The foreign weapons and other ethnological specimens were transferred to the new Museum but would only be exhibited so long as space was not required for local natural history objects. A room had been set aside to be used as a library and for other purposes by the members of the Buteshire Natural History Society. At that time the Museum was open from 10 a.m. until 8p.m. in summer and from 10a.m. until 4p.m. in winter. Visitors to the island who wished to use the library facilities could do so if they were vouched for by two Members of Council and paid 5 shillings for temporary membership.

The Aquarium building was sold (becoming the indoor swimming pool, and now Beattie Court) and, for a few years in the early 1920s, the museum found a temporary home in the Old Mansion house, High Street. This house was built in 1680 by George Cunningham and was then known simply as the Big House, because it was one of the largest in Rothesay. It was later sold to Lord Bute who lived in it until Mountstuart House was finished in the 1720s. After that the building became the Custom House and then returned to use as a dwelling house before briefly being converted into the Bute Museum. The building has recently served as the Bute Estate office, but its future is now again uncertain.

In 1926 the present Museum building in Stuart Street was handed over to the Society by the fourth Marquess of Bute. It was purpose-built with a central hall as meeting place and library

and two galleries. In 1950 the Museum closed briefly for a major re-organisation which was undertaken by Mr and Mrs J. Scott. At this time cases were acquired from the Royal Scottish Museum in Edinburgh, many of which are still in use. Mr Scott notes that 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 on Bute.' The policy has been maintained since then of limiting the collecting area to the confines of the island of Bute. Only a few items from the first collection remain in the present collection, for example the oaken pile of the old drawbridge and items taken from the castle moat when it was excavated during work carried out by the third Marquess Bute. Important archaeological finds such as the jet necklace from Mount Stuart went to Edinburgh, but in 1919 all the artefacts excavated at Dunagoil Fort came to the Museum and since then archaeological finds from the island have come to Bute Museum.

One further development in the Museum's history was the creation in 1992 of a board of Museum trustees separate from the council of the B.N.H.S. This was necessary to gain registration with the Museums and Galleries Commission, an important step, allowing the trustees to bid for items declared as Treasure Trove and to acquire items of local significance from finds disposal panels. The Museum collection is now the responsibility of the Trustees which does not seem all that far removed from the creation of the Museum committee of the Archaeological and Physical Society nearly a century ago.

Bibliography.

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