

Celebrating Twenty-Five Years

Join us for our next twenty-five years as we celebrate and promote North-East culture, which is a hugely important foundation and resource for our communities.

In January, we launched our twenty-fifth anniversary celebrations with an open night that drew more than a hundred visitors, including Councillors, MSPs, and MPs. We talked about our work to date and outlined a vision for the next twenty-five years focusing on research, teaching, community engagement, and the promotion of North-East culture and language on a grand scale. Robbie Shepherd and Jenny Shirreffs, Patron and Chair of the Friends of the Elphinstone Institute, who underwrote the event, spoke about the importance of the Institute to the University and the region. We were then treated to a specially composed commemorative tune from fiddle-great, Paul Anderson, and a celebratory poem from North-East Makar, Sheena Blackhall, both of whom are Honorary Research Fellows and have worked



Thomas A. McKean welcomes visitors

closely with the Institute. Visitors, staff, and students all got a chance to talk about our work, take in a small exhibition, including a huge range of fascinating dissertations on all aspects of North-East culture, and take part in an informal music and song session, at which we were joined by local fiddler, Richard Thomson, MP. In the following days, we received two formal Motions of congratulation from the Scottish Parliament.

You, too, can be part of our grand ambitions for North-East culture. Join us for the MLitt in Ethnology and Folklore – with graduates from twenty-three to eighty-three – or help us promote some of our activities, ambitions, and vision through volunteering, donating, or planning a legacy. We want to hear your story and your vision for the North-East. Please get in touch at elphinstone@abdn.ac.uk.

Thomas A. McKean

Lockdown Lore Collection Project

The coronavirus pandemic has altered our lives in ways that were almost impossible to imagine only a few months ago. Early on in the lockdown, we began to see people across Scotland and the world creatively respond to the situation, generating old and new forms of creative responses, or folklore as we call it. As keen fieldworkers, we realised now was the time to document these responses, not only for future generations, but to better understand how people creatively face crises together. Alison Sharman came up with the catchy name 'Lockdown Lore', and with that we soon launched our crowdsourced 'Lockdown Lore Collection Project', which has received responses from around Scotland and beyond.

The ever-growing collection, which is part of the Elphinstone Institute Archives, now has around 1000 photos of creative responses (including chalk drawings, window displays, political signs, etc.), videos, poems from amateur and professional writers, a list of new digital initiatives, and tunes and songs composed in response to the pandemic.

In addition, we have gathered a team of former students as interviewers, and they have now spoken to over twenty-five people about their lockdown experiences.

We are keen to get even more contributions and speak to more people about their lives under lockdown, and our hope in future is to make as much of the collection accessible as possible.

If you would like to contribute in some way or be interviewed, please complete the form here: <https://www.abdn.ac.uk/elphinstone/public-engagement/LockdownLore>.



image by Nicolas Le Bigre



image by Jon Simpson

Nicolas Le Bigre



From the Director

This term we're focusing on how people take part, as we've all been moving home and online. We're refining the Institute's vision and mission for the next few years, committed, as ever, to bringing North-East culture and heritage to the fore as a resource for today.

Social activities are essential for humanity and folklore is how we do it – conversation, storytelling, anecdotes, jokes, and (hopefully) sage advice gleaned from experience. Often, people think heritage and folklore are of the past, but really they're essential and dynamic ways that we make sense of the world around us as we navigate the unknown, both in adversity and in triumph. This is nowhere more obvious than in public responses to the virus outbreak – decorated windows, clever, hilarious, or pointed memes on Twitter and Instagram, clapping for the carers, distanced street parties and picnics – many of which are being documented in Nick Le Bigre's Lockdown Lore project (to take part, see front page).

Our Doric/North-East Scots regeneration project is gathering focus and pace, with schools materials and programmes being developed and tested, resources being devised, and even planning for a trial of Doric immersion schooling. The future of the language is in the hands of the youngest and the eldest. Reaching across the generations will ensure a bright future for the tongue.

Human ingenuity has always found expression through folklore, making our cultural heritage and legacies essential resources for difficult times. As we

find ourselves physically distancing, we crave social proximity all the more. People are dining together, working together, crafting and making together, singing and dancing together through virtual communities around the world. The medium may be different, but the human need is the same, and through these events and the stories that we tell each other, we traverse the present, verbally and bodily rehearsing our futures yet to come. Through learning by doing, and by taking part, we will be ready.

This is a time to integrate past and present, to think about Stanley Robertson's steppin steens o knowledge and the worldly experience found in our communities, our history, in our songs and stories, or in something like the scrubs sewing project in which Carley Williams has taken part, or the repurposing of traditional basketry skills to replace plastic bags. Learning from the past to protect our future. We learn from Jack, the good-hearted boy who makes the right choices. We steward the land and our culture, moving into a new world with firm foundations and values drawn from the North-East's unmatched cultural wealth.

North-East culture is more important to our future resilience as individuals and communities than ever. We welcome and need your support in continuing our important work: join the Friends, volunteer in our Archives, underwrite a studentship or project worker, or consider leaving a legacy to ensure a bright future for the creative treasures of North-East culture – language, ballad and song, music, story, crafts and skills. Join us and we will emerge stronger and more resilient.

Thomas A. McKean

Stanley Robertson Schools Project



Jackie Ross and Davie Donaldson

Davie Donaldson and I have been working on a Resource Pack for schools based on the life and work of Stanley Robertson, commissioned by Aberdeen City Council. This has involved collaborating with Grace Banks, Tony Robertson, and Lauren Hossack to draw on the wealth of material Stanley bequeathed us to create a resource aimed at Primary children.

The Pack looks at Stanley's role as a tradition bearer and proud member of the Traveller community. For the youngest classes, we explore some of the numerous bairn songs and street rhymes Stanley recorded. They are encouraged to think about what play was like when Stanley was a boy and how it compares to today. The middle stages explore Stanley as a famous Scot and what he did to educate people about Traveller culture, values, and traditions, especially story and song. Upper-stage classes will explore attitudes to the Traveller community, with reference to Stanley's own experience. They will be encouraged to examine historical evidence to unpick fact and opinion in relation to issues surrounding Traveller and settled communities.

As part of the project, Grace and I will visit nine schools across the city to deliver a workshop using the materials. Our aims of the workshops are to evaluate and revise the resource in light of this experience while also raising awareness of the resource. The completed Pack will be available online for all schools in the City (and beyond) to use. If you'd like to know how to access the resource when it is completed please email me on elphinstone@abdn.ac.uk.

Jackie Ross

Remembering Stanley Robertson through the Archives

Since July last year, I have been working on an Aberdeen City Council-funded project in the Institute's archives to catalogue and digitise material related to singer, storyteller, author, and cultural advocate Stanley Robertson (1940–2009).

He appears in around 150 catalogue records, making him by far the most prolific archive contributor. In the past few months, I have digitised around 100 hours of the audio and this is only the tip of the iceberg. Some of those recordings may find their way into recordings of Barrie Nichts, public talks, and storytelling and singing sessions!

Some of the more than fifty interviews Stanley conducted for the Institute's 'Oral and Cultural Traditions of Scottish Travellers' project have also been digitised. These give invaluable insight into the lives and experiences of Travellers of all ages. 100 manuscript items have also been converted, showing the volume of work that Stanley undertook to share his expertise in balladry and storytelling worldwide.

Selected archival material will be used in local schools, with workshop leaders talking and singing to young people while educating them about Scottish Travellers and their contributions to Scotland's culture. Listening to Stanley on these recordings has certainly given me a stronger appreciation for his commitment to culture and tradition. The next step is to ensure some of this material can be made accessible in a variety of contexts, online and otherwise.

Lauren Hossack



Stanley Robertson and Lawrence Tulloch, performing at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, Washington, 2003.

Cultural Heritage and Tourism Project

At the end of 2018, the Institute, in partnership with Visit Scotland, was successful in securing funding from the European Union's LEADER programme in Scotland to work with tourism and heritage groups across the North-East to capture and tell the story of the region to potential visitors. The goal was to develop a cultural narrative of Aberdeenshire, as curated by its own communities, rooted in place and tradition.

Dr Fiona-Jane Brown co-ordinated the project, working with more than thirty groups and organisations from across Aberdeenshire over seven months to identify stories, traditions, and folklore important to them and then, with local tourism bodies, to identify highlights from the resultant collection.

The highlighted stories were reimagined and turned into a suite of digital resources by Edinburgh's FREAKWORKS and will be hosted on the University's website later in the year. These open-source resources showcase the richness of North-East culture and give potential visitors a window into the region's living traditions and stories. Local organisations and businesses will be able to use the resources to complement their own promotional and marketing activity in order to increase visitor numbers to Aberdeenshire. The project will raise awareness of North-East culture, locally, nationally, and internationally, helping to strengthen local rural economies.

Simon Gall

Study Visit from Japan

I did my MLitt at the Elphinstone in 2016–17, and my dissertation looked at Stanley Robertson as an author. Now I'm a PhD student at Ritsumeikan University in Japan, researching Scottish Traveller writing, a rare medium that contains Travellers' own voices. Traveller self-representation in books is worthy of study because Traveller writers can actively select which aspects of their cultures and experiences they introduce to the non-Traveller world, without being expected to only talk about what researchers are interested in.



In February, I received a grant to come back to Scotland for the first time in two-and-a-half years. I stayed for three weeks, during which time I delivered an MLitt seminar on my research on Traveller writing, conducted fieldwork interviews with David Pullar, Jess Smith, Simon Robertson, and Martha Stewart, and also made sure to distribute copies of my written work to the contributors who had helped me to write them. It's tough to have a 'field' a long way from home, but I was lucky to have the Elphinstone staff, who always went out of their way to help me to achieve my goals. I am also grateful to them and my friends there for making me feel welcome. It was genuinely great to be back and see you all again.

Ryo Yamasaki

Elphinstone News

MLitt Ba Game Field Trip 2020

The MLitt students and staff visited the Borders on a four-day field trip at the end of February, encountering aspects of Borders culture, and experiencing the Ancrum Ba Game as spectators. On the way they visited the School of Scottish Studies Archives, and the Scottish Storytelling Centre, in Edinburgh. In the Borders they toured Sir Walter Scott's home, Abbotsford House, near Melrose.

Other visits included Lady Waterford Hall in Ford, Northumberland; Lindisfarne; the Chain Bridge Honey Farm; a ba maker, who demonstrated the construction of a ba used in various Borders Ba Games; and a Borders weaver. On the return journey they visited the Grassic



Gibbon Centre in the Mearns hosted by Jim Brown.

Alison Sharman

*Ancrum Ba Game.
Photo by our MLitt
Fieldworkers*

Spittin Bars in Buchan: Youth Music Initiative Hip Hop Project

The Institute was awarded £13,500 from Aberdeenshire Council's Youth Music Initiative to expand on last year's Hip Hop in Schools project. In February and March of this year, four Hip Hop tutors worked with 167 young people across 9 schools in Peterhead and Fraserburgh. Participants learned about beat-making, lyric writing, recording, and arranging, with each class producing its own track.

Rap is becoming increasingly recognised as an excellent tool for engaging young people and developing their literacy, digital literacy, and language skills. It also provides a vehicle for exploring place and identity in the twenty-first century, enabling young people to express themselves and to use their creativity to tell their own stories.

Our Director, Tom McKean, recently interviewed North-East rapper Jackill about his work for an article in the book *Street Music and Narrative Traditions* published by Associazione per la Conservazione delle Tradizioni Popolari in Palermo, Italy.

Simon Gall

Who's Who at the Institute

Patron

Very Rev. Prof. Sir Iain Torrance, Pro-Chancellor

Staff

Dr Thomas A. McKean, Director, Ethnology and Folklore, ballads, custom and belief, Gaelic tradition, J. M. Carpenter Project

Dr Frances Wilkins, Lecturer, Ethnomusicology, sacred singing in coastal communities, Scottish fiddle traditions in northern Canada

Professor Emeritus Ian Russell, Ethnology, Folklore, and Ethnomusicology, oral traditions, including singing, music-making, drama, and speech

Dr Colin Milton, Associate Director, Hon., Scottish Literature and Folklore

Nicolas Le Bigre, Teaching Fellow, Ethnology and Folklore, archives

Simon Gall, Public Engagement Officer

Dr Fiona-Jane Brown, Project Co-ordinator

Claire Needler, Project Co-ordinator

Alison Sharman, Administrator

Research Students

Athanasios (Sakis) Barmplexis, contemporary shamanic healing in Scotland

Kristin Borgehed, North Studentship, an ethnographic study of northern cultural performance

Mary Cane, the grandmother experience in family life today

Ronnie Gibson, relationships between contemporary and eighteenth-century fiddle traditions

Lauren Hossack, literature, heritage, and the making of Scottish communities

Nicolas Le Bigre, narratives of immigrant experience

Claire Needler, Elphinstone Scholarship, bilingualism in North-East schools

Máire Ní Bhaioill, traditional singing among children in Ireland

Lorna Summers, community boatbuilding on the Moray coast

Carley Williams, safeguarding intangible cultural heritage (ICH) in Scotland

Chris Wright, Elphinstone Scholarship, the role of traditional arts in place-based education

Honorary Research Fellows

Paul Anderson, North-East fiddle styles and repertoires

Dr David Atkinson, J. M. Carpenter Project

Dr Pat Ballantyne, Scottish step-dance traditions

Dr Julia Bishop, J. M. Carpenter Project

Sheena Blackhall, creative writing in Scots

Dr Elaine Bradtke, J. M. Carpenter Project

Dr David Northcroft, education in the North-East

Dr Robert Young Walser, J. M. Carpenter Project

Les Wheeler, Scots Language, education

Dr Sheila Young, women's pre-nuptial rituals in Scotland

What's On

We're working hard organising public events to deliver in person or online, depending on changing government guidelines. Keep up to date with all of the exciting things that we are up to at the Elphinstone Institute by following us on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.

Support the Institute

The Institute relies on outside financial support to make many of its activities possible. If you would like to help, join the Friends of the Elphinstone Institute, volunteer, or have suggestions, please contact the Administrator, a.sharman@abdn.ac.uk