

NEWS RELEASE

Issued by The Irvine Burns Club

28 September 2020

BURNS MUSEUM REMAINS CLOSED AND ANNUAL CELEBRATION CANCELLED

The Irvine Burns Club's award-winning Wellwood Burns Centre & Museum, which closed in mid-March a few days before The Scottish Government's initial Covid-19 pandemic "lock-down", will now remain closed until at least next Easter (4th April). But even that tentative re-opening date remains uncertain and will be reviewed nearer the time. This means that there will be no visits to Wellwood for local school-children next year in January and February to see Burns' original manuscripts, letters and books nor will other individuals and organisations, including several Burns Clubs, see close to hand relics that qualify Wellwood as being part of Scotland's National Burns Collection.

In announcing this, **David Burns**, the Irvine Burns Club's current President, said:

"We have taken this step in the interests of Public Health and as part of our community responsibility to fight and suppress what we now know to be a deadly virus. Many of us will have seen at first hand just how seriously Covid-19 must be taken and, over the past six months, some will have lost relatives, colleagues and friends, including people who loved Robert Burns and his works. When we closed Wellwood earlier in the year, we recognised that we had a Duty of Care to our local community and to visitors attracted by our Museum. This responsibility remains on-going and so Wellwood will remain closed until normality is resumed and restrictions lifted."

"This has not been an easy decision to take but we believe it to be the right one at a time when uncertainty remains and when lives could still be put at risk. I know that many will be disappointed that their visits to Wellwood will not take place at present and possibly for some time to come and we share their disappointment. But with so many uncertainties forcing national guidelines to be changed, often quickly and outwith our control, we would find it impossible to accommodate any more than a few visitors at any one time and that is simply not realistic."

However what is now certain is that Irvine Burns Club's traditional Annual Celebration in Irvine's Volunteer Rooms to mark the birth of Robert Burns on 25th January 1759 will not be held in its usual form next year as planned for Friday 22nd January and with the cancellation of the venue, caterer and musicians, it has unfortunately been officially removed at least in its traditional format. That event

should have been the high point for David Burns in his Presidential Year when he would not only chair the entire gathering but also propose The Immortal Memory of Robert Burns, the principal toast of any Burns Night. However, David is adamant that Robert Burns's birthday - to be exact, his 262nd - will be marked by Irvine Burns Club which already set a precedent last June by celebrating its own 195th birthday with an on-line event that included a blend of toasts, music and poetry. Prominent local people, including Provost Ian Clarkson, were involved in this novel event as well as international Burns expert Professor Gerard Carruthers and leading author Andrew O'Hagan, each of whom, including Provost Clarkson, are already Honorary Members of The Irvine Burns Club.

Applying 21st Century on-line technology to honour an 18th Century Scottish poet is certainly innovative but that is likely to be the route being taken by many Burns enthusiasts next January with several Burns Suppers and related events already cancelled. Prominent local Burns speaker, **Bill Nolan**, a Past President of the Robert Burns World Federation, confirmed that he has "already had a couple of overseas bookings cancelled as well as some closer to home in Hawick, Edinburgh, Glasgow, and Aberdeen" and he is not alone in being affected by cancellations caused by genuine uncertainties among organisers.

Cancelling an annual event is a huge decision to take, especially when it is part of the social fabric of the community and yet The Irvine Burns Club didn't hesitate to do so in the past when it was in the public interest. Club historian **Ian Dickson** explained: "We know for a fact that the 1849 Annual Dinner was cancelled "in consequence of the prevalence of disease" (a superb phrase for us to repeat 172 years later) and that the disease causing the cancellation was the cholera which had broken out in the Royal Burgh during the previous autumn."

"We can also fairly assume that the absence of an Annual Dinner minute in 1832, with the continuation in office of the 1831 President, was also due to the cholera outbreak of that year. At that time, the Dundee Board of Health had advised local people in their area against going out at night and recommended that all meetings, apart from those being held in churches in what were clearly more religious times, should be suspended or avoided, just as with us today. Less certain is that a cholera outbreak also caused there to be no Dinner in 1833 from which there are no minutes for that year but with the cholera epidemic having ended in Glasgow on 11th Nov, 1832, the Directors may well have been dissuaded from organising an Annual Dinner in January 1833."

Unfortunately, historical records within The Irvine Burns Club were not always kept as accurately as they are today and, for sure, there was nothing around that would have enabled members to celebrate as remotely as modern technology now allows. David Burns has enthusiastically embraced these on-line Irvine Burns Club events, including an international link with the City of Guelph in Canada to mark John Galt's birthday and several in-house evenings, but is delighted to have been given a second chance to propose his already-written "Immortal Memory" in January 2022 when "normal service is resumed". Irvine Burns Club has extended his Presidential term of office for a further 12 months as well as that of Vice President **Margaret Greenlees** who will be given the opportunity to propose her toast to the memory of "Bonnie Jean" at an event for which preliminary preparations have begun.

The Club's AGM in early January 2021 will go ahead as planned but will be on-line events and members will be advised on the date, time and links in its November Newsletter.

Among other casualties have been the cancellation of the popular Musical Evenings at Wellwood though these could be returning in late Spring of next year subject to local circumstances. However, particularly disappointing has been the decision taken by the Calgary Burns Club Singers whose planned appearance at the Edinburgh Festival in August 2021 also included a concert in Wellwood which inevitably has also now been cancelled.

One local group who are regular users of Wellwood is Irvine Lasses Burns Club whose current President, **Rosemary Murdoch**, said when the closure was announced: "Irvine Lasses Burns Club fully supports the decision that the Directors of The Irvine Burns Club have made in closing Wellwood Burns Centre & Museum until such times as the current medical crisis has been resolved. Our Club and Committee recognise the importance of keeping our Members and Communities safe during the growing concern created by COVID -19 (Coronavirus) and this step has almost been inevitable."

Last year, Wellwood Burns Centre & Museum was given Four-Star Recognition by VisitScotland and attracted in excess of 3,000 visitors in 2019.

Ends

Further information from:

Bill Nolan

Tel: 07885 071804