



• DORNOCH •  
HERITAGE • SOCIETY

*Talk*

# George Bain

- where next with unraveling  
the Celtic knot?

*Dr Jo Clements*



George Bain (1881-1968) was a pivotal figure in the Celtic art revival of the early twentieth century. His archive and collection of objects are now cared for by Groam House Museum, where their importance has been recognised by the award of Recognised Collection of National Significance for Scotland status. In this illustrated talk, George Bain Curator, Jo Clements, will show off some of the rarely seen treasures of the collection, place them in their historical context, outline our ongoing research, and discuss the exciting plans for the future of the collection.

'Images © The George Bain Estate'

Dornoch Council Chambers (Carnegie Buildings)

## February 18<sup>th</sup> 7.30 pm

Open to all...£1 entry to non-members  
Refreshments

Forthcoming events: "Skibo and the Great War". Talk by Skibo archivist Victoria Connor March 17th

## **Dornoch Heritage Society Talk**

**'George Bain'**

**by**

**Dr Jo Clements**

**18<sup>th</sup> February 2016**

**Historylinks Catalogue No. 2016\_005**

Hi and thanks everyone for coming out on such a cold night. Can you hear me okay at the back? Yes. So I have got time for a slide.

There's a prize for the person who can spot the deliberate spelling mistake, so moving swiftly on. I don't know how many of you have been to Groam House Museum. The museum itself is situated in Rosemarkie on the Black Isle in this rather beautiful building and we have three collections really.

We have a Pictish stone collection centred on the Rosemarkie stone. All the stones were found very locally to the museum in Rosemarkie.

We have a local history collection. I put in this picture mostly because I'd really like a bicycle like this. So it's full of pictures of the local area stretching back into the 19th century and also archaeological finds such as this one. This is probably a 13th century seal matrix and possibly found near to Ormond Castle, although it was found by metal detectorists and they weren't perhaps as conscientious in recording where they got it as we might have liked.

It's about this big.

And then the third collection is the archive and materials relating to the work of the early 20th century Celtic revival artist George Bain and here he is. Working on the design for one of his commercially produced carpets, the Hunting Rug, which I'll talk a bit more about later.

This is my baby. The George Bain collection is a recognised collection of national significance for Scotland. There are 43 collections throughout Scotland which are held by museums that aren't national museums but that are recognised by the Scottish government as being particularly special.

Groam House is one, the Singer archive down in Clydebank is another one and the Highland Folk Museum just recently was recognised with this status. So it is something really quite special for us to have in Rosemarkie. The collection has somewhere between two and three thousand items in it. They range from greetings cards produced by Bain, we've got bowls, we've got etchings, lino prints, we have crockery and pretty much anything you can imagine you might have in your house we have in the George Bain collection decorated with Celtic designs. Most people probably encounter Bain today through this book. I don't know whether anyone possesses this book.

Yes, I can see some nods and waves. In fact some of you I've met before haven't I? Celtic Art the Methods of Construction. This edition has been continuously in print since 1951 and this is by no means the first edition. It was preceded by a number of other editions as well. In this book what Bain sets out is how you can draw Celtic knots and associated design things starting from really simple principles. So he breaks it right down, starts off with simple patterns of dots, adds in lines, adds in curves between them and before you know it you're drawing things like this.

So Bain was born in 1881 in Scrabster. He was the son of local people. In 1888 the family moved to Edinburgh. There's a story told in the family that they were going to emigrate but once they got to Edinburgh a mysterious cousin told them that Edinburgh was really the place to be. Good universities, good education system and so they settled there and in 1895 Bain went to work for a firm of Edinburgh printers.

He attended the School of Applied Art in Edinburgh as a part-time student, showing early promise in drawing.

Between 1899 and 1902 he went on to the Edinburgh College of Art again as a part-time student while continuing with his work for the printmakers. By 1901 he's exhibiting at the Royal Scottish Academy and in 1902 he wins the first prize and a scholarship in the National Scholarship of Drawing and Painting competition in Great Britain and Ireland. So we can see that he's working commercially as a printer, as an illustrator and he's developing his skills through education in art and he starts exhibiting reasonably widely at the RSA and later at the Paris Salon and some other places as well.

1907 introduces lino printing. I'm going to talk about this in a little while because this is a rather mysterious aspect of Bain's life that really needs a bit more research. He was eventually appointed an art teacher at Juniper Green, a leafy suburb of Edinburgh.

Eventually he got his degree in 1915. He had been in higher education for about nine years a long time, even longer than me.

The First World War came along and he joined the army in the Royal Engineers. When he came back from the war he was appointed the principal art teacher at Kirkcaldy High School and he held that until he retired in 1946. And that's quite interesting because as well as being based in Kirkcaldy he also had responsibility for art education in the wider Fife area.

More exciting exhibits. In 1946 he retires to Drumnadrochit that's where his wife's people were from. In 1952 he moved to Staffordshire for family reasons and died in 1968 aged 87.

So we know where we are, this is the sort of stuff he was doing early on when he was employed by the printmakers. This very nice but fairly uninteresting illustration work, you know, just really being a sort of jobbing artist as it were. At some point, we're not quite sure when, he suddenly becomes obsessed with the early medieval art of Scotland and Ireland. So things like the Rosemarkie slab, the Negros slab, the Lindisfarne Gospels and things like the Tara brooch as well.

And he was mostly encountering these through books recently published. This is in fact Bain's copy of Allen and Anderson's 'Early Christian Monuments of Scotland' (Historylinks Archive Cat No. 2024\_058\_05) which as you can see has been so well used it has actually disintegrated. We're not conserving this item because we'd rather like its disintegrated form.

If anyone wants to come and have a closer look at some of the pictures that have become a bit bleached then please come to see me afterwards and we can look at them on the laptop.

So what Bain starts doing is looking at pictures of early medieval art manuscript stones and trying to copy out the designs that are on them. On the right here you can see him copying out examples of beard pullers from the Book of Kells. He has a bit of an obsession with the beard pullers. And you

can see that every time he copies something out he puts underneath a wee panel that shows you the actual size.

You can see that he's blown it up here perhaps more than 10 times in fact. And that's so he can get really into the design and see exactly how it's constructed and see all the detail that's going on in there. And then he starts to do this thing where he starts to say, 'well how can I help other people to draw these designs?'. And he starts to really break it down in a teaching aid.

Because you can break this down into really simple steps and then build up something that looks really satisfying, Bain the teacher thinks, 'Aha this is really something that I can use with my pupils'. And he starts getting his pupils to try and draw these designs and make designs for craftwork. One of the things that we have in the collection is a selection, this is a facsimile I'm afraid, but it is full size.

If he draws out all of these large sized examples, so this is just one panel and he sticks these around the walls of his classroom his pupils can see what's going on. And this is another example as well. And they seem to have really taken to it.

This is a photograph of items designed and or made by Bain's pupils. We have quite a lot of these in the collection and often they're captioned with the ages of the pupils that made them. So clearly he's really trying to sell this as an educative method as well.

At some point in Kirkcaldy they put on an exhibition that consists of 11 rooms of this type of design. And there's a lot of it going on and it's not just in schools that he's doing it. He starts a collaboration with the Kidderminster carpet firm, Quayle & Tranter Ltd and produces a number of rugs like this. Now this is the hunting rug. So cool as you can see the horses here and the deer here.

Although I'm always slightly puzzled by the fact that the deer are running towards the horse. I don't think that's how hunting works. And there he is laying out the design on the floor of his house on this square paper.

And we in fact have some of these pieces in the collection as well. So it's really exciting to be able to actually see him at work as it were. In the collection we have a number of hunting rugs.

It was also available in form it is here. And excitingly one of our ruby hunting rugs has stamps on it showing that it was in cabin 27 of the Cunard cruise liner 'Somalia'. We don't quite know how many of the cabins had hunting rugs but that's quite an exciting vignette into how widely spread this type of design was becoming. When he retired to Drumnadrochit he saw this as the opportunity to realise a really long-held ambition to start a college of Celtic cultures.

First of all they would provide I suppose accreditation. If you bought all his books and worked through them and learnt all the skills and then produced some pieces of your own work and submitted them then you would get a certificate saying that you had been sort of you got an award from the college of Celtic cultures. So there was that aspect of it. And the idea really was twofold.

The other aspect of it was that this would be a place in the Highlands to which ordinary people could come and learn. So he talks about you know shepherdesses coming down out of the hills after the day had done to learn in this building, which today is the Ben Lever hotel under Loch Ness Brewery. And he starts putting the college of Celtic cultures logo on lots of things.

Here's a hunting rug and sorry this hasn't come out very well but this image here is the logo from the top. So he's seeing the college of Celtic cultures as a mark of quality that you could put on products.

These are some of my favourite things in the collection. Unfortunately this one has had a really hard life and the paint is flaking off so it's only now in pictures that we see it. I've put these in to show that this wasn't just something Bain did for his job. It wasn't a philosophy he had to make money. This really was his life.

In the collection we have all sorts of household items that are decorated with this Celtic design. We have these rather superb wooden bowls and we have napkin rings. Can you imagine the difficulty of painting on a napkin ring? This is a sort of large place mat I suppose. We have a set of six of these smaller sized plate mats, each in a different colourway.

It even extended to things that they were wearing. This is a rather lovely handbag and can you imagine carving your own buttons? A bangle that Bain made for his wife. A brooch as well. And this handbag currently on loan to the National Museum for the Celts exhibition. So if you're going down do have a look, let me know how it's getting on. I'm pretty chuffed about it.

This is a handmade rug. It is probably two metres wide. You can convert that to imperial. Can someone convert that for me? Six foot wide. Six foot in this dimension and slightly longer in this dimension. It's the most incredible amount of work you can really imagine. Possibly obsession is the best word here. And finally this tea service. This is a commercially produced tea service onto which they've painted this rather beautiful key pattern. We have six large plates, six side plates, six soup bowls, six saucers, six cups, this coffee pot, a sugar basin and a cream jug. And every single item has been individually hand-painted with this design.

Obviously Bain wasn't the first person to get a bit obsessed with early medieval art. So in 2012 Groam House was lucky enough to receive a 'Collecting Cultures' grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund and this allowed us to buy a few things that were missing from the Bain collection. We bought a few rugs but also to buy things that would help to set the Bain collection in context.

So the items we're seeing here are all a little bit earlier than Bain. They're things like replicas of the Hunterston brooch and other replicas that I suppose had been popularised by Queen Victoria and her whole obsession with the Highlands. Things like paper knives by Robert Ballater and this rather beautiful WA Davidson tankard. These help to show what was happening before Bain got involved in the scene and that is quite useful for us to be able to set Bain in context.

We also have quite a lot of items by the Richies of Iona. Now their contextual information again, they were working at pretty much the same time as Bain. So we can see what other people are doing at the same time and some of it you can see is kind of similar. You can recognise these birds from things like Bain's bowls. Other things are really quite different.

This is a blotter in which you get this sort of West Highland influence coming in as well. So that's quite interesting because we can see that Bain was doing a lot less of this. Although he was doing a lot Bain is well known for his Celtic work and that was, as you know, one of the reasons and one of the ways in which he was a major contributor to cultural life. He actually did quite a lot of other work as well and we have already seen his sort of jobbing illustrator work. He also did a lot of lino prints, a lot of dry point etchings, and some watercolours, a couple of oils as well. And again, we have all of

these in the collection but we don't really know if this part of the collection is particularly well understood.

So this summer, some crazy person has had the idea that we're going to turn the dilapidated 19th century stable block where we have our museum office into a temporary exhibition space, focusing on Bain's two dimensional works, his paintings, his dry points, his lino cuts. And while this is giving me small nightmares, because some of the windows are broken and there are a few holes in the floor that I'm going to have to deal with, it is actually quite exciting because it gives us an excuse to do a bit of research on bits of the collection that we don't know very much about.

The research is very much ongoing and this is just a bit of a taster of some of the directions we're taking the research and what we think might happen with it. So one of the things we're looking at is the extent to which Bain takes early medieval models and adapts them. When you first look at Bain's Celtic work, it doesn't look like there is very much adaptation. He might perhaps not work borders into different shapes, he might take elements from different pictures, stones and combine them together, but it all looks very recognisably Celtic. And this really contrasts with some of the other people who were working at the same time. Whether the Celtic influence is much more blended with things like Art Nouveau. But actually, Bain does more adaptation than you might think.

I'm indebted to Dr Victoria Whitworth for setting us off on this trail of discovery. She had a look at this plaque in our collection. This is Bain's memorial for his wife, Jessie and at the top here, you have a figure who he adapts from the figure of St John in the Book of Counts. Jessie herself is just down here in this wee plaque and looking at it on first glance, you can see that that's John going on there. When you actually start to compare them, you can see that Bain has made some differences. They're quite subtle, but they're actually quite important to the overall view of the memorial. So for example, St John here has very close-set eyes. And his eyes are very big in proportion to the rest of his face. The other thing is he has quite a long nose and quite high arched eyebrows. When we look across at the figure in Jessie's plaque here, we can see that Bain has made the eyes much, much smaller. So they're more in proportion to the face as a whole. He's made the eyebrows more natural looking and the nose as well is not quite so long and thin. St John has rather horrible hair. It's a bit ragtag, really, if we're honest. And when we go across to Jessie's plaque, although Bain has kept this sense of the curl of the hair, he's made it more detailed so that it looks perhaps more natural as well, although still stylised. So there's something interesting going on here.

And we can see this again in other places. This is a poem that Bain decorated to commemorate Willie Souter. This comes from Douglas Young's book of poems 'A Braid O Thistles'. And these figures at the top have recognisable models in the 'Book of Kells'. You know, you look at them and you think, oh yes, I can tell that there's an influence creeping in there. But as well, he's made them look somehow less stylised, perhaps slightly more human.

Again, and this continues. So I'm showing you here Hilton of Cadboll and Aberlemno number three, both of which show hunting scenes. So at Aberlemno you can see the dogs and the deer down here. And the same at Aberlemno, they're in this bottom left hand corner. In this rather lovely menu for the Celtic Congress in Edinburgh in 1950, we can see Bain using this model of the hunt. But you've got this deer that looks much more like a deer, it's much less stylised. And you've got these dogs as well, which look quite real. But there is an added complication here. I don't know if you can see, but just here at the top of the deer's thigh, Bain has put a wee curl. Now in his models, that doesn't appear. Perhaps it was there and it's been worn away. But what he's done here is he's almost sort

of rectified them with this wee swirl thing. So he's taken his model, he's made it more naturalistic, and then he's sort of rectified it with a bit of a swirl. So he's more complicated than you might think.

Oh yes, horses. The horse as well, he does the same thing. I mostly put this one on because it's got Edderton on it, and I thought you'd enjoy your local stone. And again, this is another example. This is the Inverurie stone, which has a horse here that you can just about see. And in this greetings card, he takes the horse and just fiddles with it ever so slightly. But those slight changes are another area of research that we're looking at. Which bits of early medieval art Bain seems to have been most attracted to. And a case in point is when he depicts birds. On these three items here, you can see we've got really just one type of bird. It's this bird with a very stylised wing with the bars on it, and often with this interlaced head as well. If anyone wants to see that one at the end, I'll show it to you big on the computer screen. And here you can just see these pink pieces are the bird's bodies, and then their heads are going forward. These are birds that appear quite frequently. And this is part of the carpet from one of the carpet pages of the Lindisfarne Gospels. And you can see these stylised bodies here coming up into the heads and the long tails.

But it's this very distinctive, I'm not even sure what you'd describe that shape as, this sort of shape. It's triangle with a curved edge. But when we come and look at medieval manuscripts, when we come and look at Pictish stones, those aren't the only types of birds that appear.

On the Hilton Cadboll stone, you have this rather lovely inhabited scroll up the sides. And if you look here, this is a bird. This is a bird, so its beak is here, this is its neck, it's got a sort of long wing, and that's one of its feet going forward there in the tail here that turns into a bit of knotwork.

And so these birds are somehow longer, they're more angular, and they have wings that are distinct from their bodies. And the only place we can find Bain using anything like this so far is this bit of tablecloth. So for some reason, he really prefers this much more stylised bird shape that I discussed first of all.

So that's quite interesting too, because again, we're getting this sense that he's making really distinct choices about what he's taking into his art, that we don't yet fully understand. How am I doing for time? I've reset my watch. Another thing that we don't yet know enough about, and we're doing some research on as we go into this exhibition, is not just where Bain was exhibiting, but what he was exhibiting, and who was exhibiting alongside him.

How he fitted into this wider artistic context, not just with his Celtic work, but with his wider work as well. Sorry, this has come out very badly. These two etchings, they're not technically etchings, dry points, we have in the collection, each have written on them RSA after the title. And we have a whole pile that say RSA on them. So we're hoping to look through the collection to sort of reconstruct what we have that he exhibited. Hopefully we can go to other archives and find more information there to add into that.

I'm hoping that's going to tell us something interesting about Bain and his contemporaries. The other thing I'm really quite interested in is where Bain was selling his work, and how much he was selling, and who was buying it.

So in the collection we have this price list. Not in Bain's hand. Bain's handwriting is terrible. Such a beautiful draftsman, but his handwriting really scruffy. So I'm assuming he got someone else to write

this out for him. And he's listed all of his dry points, and watercolours, drawings, and given them each a price. So he clearly was trying to sell them. Did he sell them? Who bought them? And what does that say about Bain's position as an artist in these other media? Back to the beard pullers, and lino. Now I imagine that everybody had fun with lino cuts at school. Hopefully you've still got all of your fingers.

There is a newspaper article in which Bain makes a claim about having introduced lino, or a new technique in lino cutting, to Scotland. Now he can't have been the first person to be doing lino cutting in Scotland. That seems really improbable. So this suggests that he's introduced something else new. And the question is, what on earth was that? He certainly was really prolific in lino. We have tens of different prints from his lino cuts.

We have a number of the lino blocks like this one. It's possible that because Bain was based in Kirkcaldy, which is a centre of lino manufacture, that perhaps there was some relationship with the firms that was resulting in him being given a special type of lino, perhaps a new finer grain type, that would allow you to do this sort of fine work that he's got going on here. But we simply don't know.

So this is an exciting area to find out about. One of the things he does do that I'm not sure I like, to be honest, is he starts using thick lino almost as if it was wood. So here this has a sort of wooden appearance, but this is in fact a fat piece of lino that he's using to make the cover for a blotter. So is it perhaps this way that he's innovative? We'll let you know. We'll keep you posted. And again here, what we've got is a wooden box at the base, but rather than carving into the wood on the lid, what he's done is he's actually carved and then painted a piece of lino.

So it's lino being used as if it were wood. So where next after we've learnt all the answers to these questions? Well, the main reason I put this in is sort of almost as a plea really, which is that we don't know enough about George Bain. This is the best biography of Bain that exists. And as you can see, it's not very thick at all. So there's a lot of research to be done. And part of my role is to encourage research.

So I have an email address, which you'll see at the end of the presentation. We have an office which can be opened to be used as a research space. So if you do fancy finding out some more about Bain, if you want to do some research for us, if you want to access the collection, please do get in touch with me and we'll see what we can sort out.

We also do private viewings if anyone fancies coming and having a wee look at opening the drawers and things. So yeah, please, please come and see me. Our main museum is open from Good Friday, 11 till 4.30 in the week. Saturday and Sunday it's 2 till 4.30. November's a long time. And the art exhibition for which we're doing the research will be open from the 4th of June. It'll be open for weekends only in June and seven days a week from July and August.

If anyone fancies giving me a day of their time to come and invigilate, I would provide you with tea, cake and endless gratitude. And you know, behind the scenes looks. Yeah, please, please come.

And yeah, we've got a website, [groamhouse.org.uk](http://groamhouse.org.uk) Gosh, I suddenly feel like I'm wrapping up a comedy show.

Thank you all for listening. I hope that wasn't too short.