

By appointment to Skibo Castle, a repairer of model ships

Celebrating his 30th birthday at Skibo Castle recently, pop star Robbie Williams and his guests may have stopped to admire a small wooden model of a ship on a narrow table in one of the halls.

The replica of the *Wild Dayrell*, a steamer which dates back to Andrew Carnegie's era and has an intriguing history, is just one of the numerous curios, objects d'art and ornaments which are scattered round the castle, adding to its comfortable country house atmosphere.

Robbie might just have paused long enough from the celebrations to admire the sleek lines and complicated rigging of the *Wild Dayrell* and ponder its background. What the pop star could not have known, however, is that the model, rescued from a castle attic in a dilapidated state, had been restored to its former glory by the skill and expertise of a Golspie pensioner.

Seventy-five-year-old Donald MacLeod, a father of five and grandfather of 14, first became interested in model-making some 20 years ago after his wife, Jean, and youngest son, Norman, gave him a kit as a Christmas or birthday present — he can't now remember which.

It was a particularly appropriate gift for a man who hates to be idle and, in his mid-seventies, is still working part-time as a van driver for *The Northern Times*. Donald, of 62 Tower Street, Golspie, also loves boats and at one time harboured dreams of a seafaring career. But he became a lighthouseman instead and, after more than 30 years with the service, he can turn his hand to just about any practical task.

A particular interest is repairing clocks — because, he says, he just wants to know why they don't work!

Born in 1928 and brought up in Harris, Donald's desire to go to sea was implacably opposed by his father, himself a merchant seaman working with the City Line. Donald surmises now that it was because, at the time, merchant seamen could be away from their families for as long as two years at a time and his father did not want that for him.

Instead he went to work as a "boots" or porter in the Shieldaig Lodge Hotel in Wester Ross when it reopened after the war. He was called up for National Service in 1946 and later worked at

the Royal Hotel in Ullapool, earning £9 a month.

In the early 1950s, Donald left the hotel trade and, along with a first cousin, began labouring at the various hydro-electric dams then under construction throughout the Highlands. He recalls it as a wild time, working 100 hours a week and living in Nissen huts cheek by jowl with Irish navvies who regularly got drunk and exhorted him to join in their many fights. Particularly memorable, but for all the wrong reasons, was the food — the workers got tripe for breakfast, a packed lunch, and tripe again for dinner. Donald said wryly: "You know what they say, spam and jam built the dams!"

by Caroline McMorran

The hydro construction work was beginning to ease off and he and his cousin were looking for other employment when they heard that men were being recruited to work on the Rhodesian railway. It sounded like a great adventure and the two bought tickets to South Africa, only to take cold feet at the last minute. Instead, Donald joined the lighthouse service where he was to remain happily employed for the next 35 years.

"I thought I'd just try it for a bit and see how it went," he said. "The pay at the time was £28 a month and we got a free house along with coal and clothes. I was hooked, as soon as I began working with the service. To me, it was a cushy number after the hard manual work with the hydro and on the croft at home — there were no tractors at the time and it was all spade work, with the cutting done by scythe."

Donald saw service at Inchkeith in the Firth of Forth, Barra Head, Corsewall Point near Stranraer, the Bass Rock, Dunbar, Ruvall on Islay, the Butt of Lewis, Sule Skerry in Orkney, Neist Point in Skye, and finally at Cape Wrath. He was made redundant, aged 61, as automation did away with the need for manned lighthouses. At the time Jean and the family, which had now grown to include Duncan, Fiona, Donald John, Norman and Amanda, were based in Golspie.

"The lighthouse service taught me a lot. Things were always breaking down and you couldn't very well call out a mechanic, you just



Donald MacLeod (right)

had to deal with all the minor things yourself," said Donald.

"When I was working, there were no TVs and very few radios, but there were excellent work shops. We had plenty of tools and plenty of time to make things. Everyone had a hobby. I used to do a lot of woodworking and made some bedside cabinets.

"The biggest problem with the service was moving from post to post. The standard of education was different wherever we went, so we would find the children were either behind or ahead."

Donald was still working with the lighthouse service when he was given that present of a model boat kit nearly 20 years ago. He commandeered a corner in the kitchen and wouldn't let anyone use it until the model was complete.

"It took probably seven or eight months to do, because I could only work on it in my time off. My interest just developed from there. Every Christmas or birthday, my family would buy me more. I eventually decided I would do a model for each member of my family so they could have their choice.

"It's a great hobby and I just love it. It was good therapy for me, but you require a tremendous amount of patience. With so many other things happening, I don't have much time, and I haven't done any models for some years now."

Donald's models have included sailing ships,