

## Hogmanay Remembered: Gale Fewings

My very first experience with the Hogmanay New Year's event at Hutchison House took place in 1992. This was also a first for the newly appointed curator, Stephanie Forrester; office assistant, Connie Thompson, and me. Linda Chandler, who was also on staff at the time, was the only one among us who had any experience with the event. To be perfectly honest, I am still not quite sure when Hutchison House Museum actually started celebrating Hogmanay.

Some memorable moments that come to mind from that day include the following. The day started out beautifully with hoar frost clinging to virtually everything, and to my enduring delight, it was still there at the end of that very busy day. I don't think I've ever seen a day quite like it since. I'm pretty sure that some of Jim Forrester's photos of the hill laden with hoar frost are still in the museum's photo album.

Then came the surprises. Being a little naive as we were, who knew that trying to make bread the 'day of' with frozen bread dough was not maybe the best idea. In an effort to get the dough to rise we had pans laid out near every heat source we could find in order to ensure the bread would be ready for baking. The whole lower level of the house smelled like yeast. First crisis averted the freshly baked loaves were loaded onto an open shelf that lined one wall of the old tiny modern kitchen. Sometime midway through the festivities one end of a shelf decided to let go from the wall and down came the bread.

The second big surprise was the fact that the horde of well-wishers that year was overwhelming, and we started to run extremely low on scotch. As many will know, atholl brose is a heady mixture of water, scotch, and honey, heated to perfection, topped with a dollop of whipped cream and toasted oats. It has always been a very popular beverage that many visitors look forward to. Given the fact that we would be in dire straits indeed if the proverbial well ran dry, volunteers with the means ran home to raid their own private stock in order to save the day.

For the next few years spanning from 1993-1998 I was involved either as a contract employee or as a volunteer. I was still helping with some of the food prep, especially the making of Scotch eggs, which is a real team effort. To her credit Stephanie added significantly to the offering of foods to be sampled, and cloutie dumpling was the most challenging year by year. During the actual Hogmanay event I was usually relegated to the kitchen looking after the atholl brose and helping with the other kitchen duties. It was lots of fun working with my friends and wow the brose gave off great boozy fumes that made us all giddy, especially in that tiny kitchen.

I officially became the curator of Hutchison House on January 1, 1999, and thereafter my role changed, I was no longer hanging out in the kitchen during the event. In the years that followed many of my memorable moments tend to blur, however, some things I'll never forget.

While I will admit to loving the taste of cloutie dumpling I will confess I hated making it. I used to call it "the curse of the cloutie". You see, cloutie dumpling is a boiled pudding made the traditional way by mixing all the ingredients together, while boiling cloth in water prior to covering same with flour then plopping the dough in the centre of the cloth. Once you have done this you pull up the edges and secure them with string leaving some room for expansion while you make sure that no water will seep in during the 3 ½ hours that it takes to boil the thing on the stove. The fun really starts when its time to remove the cloutie from the still boiling water, being careful to work as quickly as possible to cut the string and turn the steaming dumpling out on a pan before the dough sticks to the cloth. Mind you, the flour used to coat the cloth is now burning hot and sticky. If you do not work fast enough the outer

surface of the cloutie will tear and stick to the cloth (you definitely do not want that). Now that you have burned your fingers and cursed a blue streak you have something on the pan that, to me, closely resembles grey brain matter. The pan is then placed in the oven to bake until a lovely brown skin forms on the outside. By the end of it all one can be very proud of one's accomplishment, however I don't think any of our visitors ever really appreciated the sacrifice. We followed the same process, with the same amount of swear words, until 2017 when I discovered cloutie dumpling could be made in a bowl covered with saran wrap in the microwave. It still tastes just a good! I will swear to that with much less profanity.

Here's one big cautionary note about haggis. We always bought our haggis from Franz's Butcher Shop so there was no need to struggle with making it from scratch according to tradition. Originally haggis consisted of sheep's pluck (heart, liver, and lungs), minced with onion, oatmeal, suet, spices, and salt, mixed with stock, and cooked while traditionally encased in the animal's stomach. And yes, haggis too is a boiled pudding. The trick with heating premade haggis is to heat it very slowly in water on the stovetop. Never ever let the water come to a boil or you will rue the day. If this happens the outer casing will break away and shrink causing you to have a bunch of goo in a pan full of hot water. How do I know? Because I have seen it done! In fact, you cannot even remove the haggis by poking it with forks or the same thing will happen. There is nothing worse than watching someone recite Burns' "Address to a Haggis" when it has no casing and just looks like a pile of porridge on the platter.

There is an old saying that goes "if something can go wrong it will go wrong". Take the Scotch egg fiasco for example. Early one New Year's Day, Linda Chandler and I arrived at the museum to begin the mammoth task of cutting and plating all the food for the event. To our horror we discovered that many of the Scotch eggs that we had made the day before had frozen solid in the old fridge – we are talking dozens of eggs here!

While we were able to slice them in half and salvage the outer layer of sausage meat, many of the eggs were crystallized and had to be replaced. What to do, what to do? Especially given the fact that it being a holiday all the local grocery stores were closed. I called my husband John and he gathered what we had in our fridge and headed over to collect what Linda had at home. It was a blessing that she had lots on hand because she was expecting company for breakfast over the holidays. John was met a Linda's door by her friend Kathy who declared "I hear we have an egg emergency".

We can laugh about it now, but at the time we were frantic, not to mention the fact that we still had to boil and shell the eggs before they could be placed in the empty sausage pockets. I worked on the fresh eggs while Linda dealt with the frozen ones. By the way, not all of the eggs were the same size so you can imagine some didn't quite fit snugly.

In the end we spent so much time trying to stem the damage that much of the morning had passed and we still had not finished with the other cutting and plating duties.

When our 'First Footer' Iain Steele and his wife, Rennie, arrived we were working madly trying to get everything done. They both rolled up their sleeves and jumped right into the fray. As museum volunteers began to show up we put them to work. We were all so busy that we almost missed the appointed start of the Hogmanay celebration with the formal entrance of the first footer at precisely 1pm. After that we always made sure to have lots of volunteers come early to help.

More recently John was called again to come to our rescue during a snowstorm to bring us milk that we'd forgotten to procure for the event. Hogmanay was well underway and now the roads were heavily

snow covered and cars lined both sides of the street. Erin Panepinto thought just in the nick of time that John would have a hard time finding somewhere to park to deliver the milk, so she raced out through the snow in costume to meet him at the street. They had a 'milk hand-off' and he continued on his way. Yet another crisis averted, however that same year Erin had purchased biodegradable plastic cups, which seemed like a great idea, until we found they melted with the heat of the atholl brose. At least we had lots of teacups in the cupboard. It meant more dishes to wash, but no more emergency calls to John that day.

The lead up to Hogmanay did not alter much over the years. There were still the Scotch eggs to contend with along with the black bun, shortbread, oatcakes, cheese, baguettes (no more homestyle loaves), toasted oats (one year, Loretta Terry forgot them in the oven, and we had a visit from our local fire department), the items necessary for the atholl brose (including the special occasion permit), the haggis and the cloutie dumpling, in addition to arranging for the piper, first footer, haggis addresser, Lynn Mooney's wonderful Highland dancers, the fiddler, the Hasty Ps Pipe and Drum fellas, invites to local dignitaries, organizing our HH volunteers, getting floats together for the day, praying for good weather, etc. etc. Thankfully, Betty Hinton always made sure to prepare the potted salmon every single year, bless her heart!

There were some years when we had more than enough food and the leftovers were shared among the staff and volunteers. Some other years sadly we practically had visitors licking the plates. Mind you it came as no surprise that what should have passed as samples became a midday meal for some. Often too many scenarios came into play every year that it was difficult to judge from one time to the next.

Weather was a real factor as there were times when the day was so balmy that coats were not necessary and other times when it was so frigid that our piper, Colin Campbell had a hard time keeping his bagpipes from freezing up and even wore plaid pants instead of his kilt.

One New Year's Day Linda Chandler and I even took time out to make snow angels on the terrace in costume. When we came back inside Jean Cole, who was always on hand to sell atholl brose tickets, was laughing along with us. She had seen it all through the bookshop window.

The funny thing is that no matter what the weather Hogmanay was never cancelled. During a snowstorm a few years ago the Hutchison House phone was ringing off the hook with callers asking if it was going ahead – of course it did, and we still had a crowd.

Some time around Hogmanay 2000-2002 Norman Savage headed up a little singing group of volunteers including Don Willcock, Phillip Day, Norm himself and I think Peter Koeslag. Norm even handed out song sheets for our visitors to join in. While the singing did not continue with the passage of time, it was a charming heartfelt celebration of the season and a fond memory.

Another memorable moment came about very spontaneously when our first footer Iain Steele took his lovely wife Rennie in his arms and danced around the keeping room to the delight of all. I can't remember exactly what year that was, however, given the usual crowded conditions of most years, it must have been one of those very rare occasions with the crowd was sparse.

The very best part of Hogmanay has always been the people coming together as a community, whether they be Hutchison House volunteers, community volunteers such as our first footers, pipers, fiddlers, Highland dancers and their families, haggis addressers, or visitors alike. Having been involved with the

annual Hutchison House Hogmanay event for the better part of thirty years, I feel so very privileged to have met and celebrated with so many wonderful people.