

## A gem on our doorstep

When a community is truly involved in a project from the start the achievements can go well beyond the original remit. Historic Scotland started the ball rolling at Lincluden Abbey, in Dumfries-shire, but it was the commitment of the volunteers, supported by an enthusiastic professional, that made this project such a great success.

In 2003 Historic Scotland approached the North West Communities in Partnership to discuss how they might jointly develop a project to promote a sense of community ownership at Lincluden Collegiate Church, known locally as Lincluden Abbey. The aim was to reduce anti-social behaviour, promote tourism and develop better access to the site. The post of a community development worker (culture & heritage) was then created to take the initiative forward.

The management committee of the North West Resource Centre was approached to find active members interested in protecting their local heritage site. This led a group of like-minded enthusiasts to meet and form the Culture & Heritage Active Volunteers (CHAV).

The first thing we felt we had to do was to consult with the community. An extensive consultation process was put into action with local community groups and organisations, most of which had little or no previous involvement in local heritage projects.

In August 2005 we launched our plans through an awareness raising event called Abbey Antics . Over 1000 people attended this unique spectacle, which was the first of its kind in the area. We received tremendously positive feedback from those who attended on the day. This was our first big exercise and put us all to the test. We discovered that our group worked well together under pressure, and it really brought out the skills of individual members.

CHAV members, along with the community development worker, made a short film documenting the thoughts and observations of the Abbey Antics event . Shot at Lincluden Abbey, the film also features the volunteers giving a tour of the Abbey, and provided insights into its history. The film clearly demonstrates how the volunteers overcame some of the difficulties in the organisation and delivery of the event. We also held an evaluation day using National Standards of Community Engagement, and found this to be an invaluable tool for future ambitions.

Having created widespread and renewed interest about the Abbey in the local community, the Interpretation & Information sub group has recently produced a new leaflet. It contains photographs and a short history of the Abbey and is currently being distributed to local schools, libraries, churches and tourist outlets throughout the region. We also have a website in preparation.

Earlier this year CHAV was approached by the Robert the Bruce Trust to help in the commemoration celebrations of the 700th anniversary of the slaying of the Red Comyn by Robert the Bruce in Greyfriars Church in Dumfries. Two projects were undertaken. The first, a film entitled Bruce's People, was written and performed by members of the group at NWRC, and shown to great acclaim in Greyfriars Church on the Anniversary. The second project involved 25 community groups throughout the region being given a square of canvas to paint. When put together the finished painting showed the slaying of the Comyn on that fateful day.

So much for the past! Most exciting of all for the future, CHAV is currently trying to acquire a piece of unused land adjacent to the Abbey with a view to creating a medieval play park, a biodiversity area, an interpretation shelter and a permanent landscape design including picnic areas, paths and parking facilities. A feasibility study to look into the realisation of these plans will start later this year following the decision of a Lottery bid.

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'I am of the opinion that my life belongs to the community, and as long as I live it is my privilege to do for it whatever I can.'  
*George Bernard Shaw*