

Under the title “Kilts, Reels and Haggis” Olivia Smedley, a member of Sandbach History Society, spoke about the formation of the Sandbach and District Caledonian Society at the March meeting of the Society.

In order to explain how Caledonian societies came about, Ms Smedley gave a “broad brush” history of the Scottish people, with particular reference to the attempt by the English to destroy Scottish identity,

In 1603, King James VI of Scotland inherited the throne of England and Ireland and moved to London as James I, but it was not until 1707 that the Act of Union with Scotland was passed, creating a united kingdom. This led to widespread opposition in Scotland with the rise of the Jacobite movement which aimed to restore the Stuarts back on the throne. In 1745, Charles Edward Stuart, grandson of the deposed James II, led an uprising which culminated in the Battle of Culloden with his troops being slaughtered by the British troops.

After Culloden, the British government began a period of repression against the Scottish people. The wearing of tartan, carrying of arms, and speaking Gaelic were banned and the power of the clan chiefs was destroyed. Highlanders were evicted from their lands in the Highland clearances

When George IV visited Scotland in 1822 (known as the “king’s jaunt”) he was the first British monarch to do so since the Act of Union. Walter Scott was tasked with planning the visit. Scott re-created a romantic view of Scotland’s past in pageants and parades. Tartan attire was encouraged during the visit and the king himself ordered a Highland dress outfit. A new Scottish identity began to be created but one which had not existed in reality.

Later, Queen Victoria and Prince Albert fell in love with the Scottish Highlands, making it their holiday home and eventually purchasing Balmoral castle. They were enthusiastic about tartan, using it in their décor and clothing. The Victorian period also saw a resurgence of Highland Games, establishing them as a significant cultural event.

Ms Smedley then turned to Scottish activities in Sandbach. She said that Harry Elder had been a member of the Scots Guards and had served with them during the war. He came to England when he secured a position as police officer with the Cheshire Constabulary. When he was stationed at Helsby a colleague introduced him to the Helsby Caledonian Society.

He was transferred to Sandbach in the 1950s and, with his wife Hilda and daughter Helen, took over the police house in Elworth. In September 1958 Harry put an advertisement in the Sandbach Chronicle asking if there was interest in forming a Caledonian Society in Sandbach. A small group met at the Elder’s house and, to the accompaniment of gramophone records of Jimmy Shand and his band, discussed a future programme. Ms Smedley said that it was an eclectic mix of people and included a doctor, a clergyman, a bank manager, a housewife and an actress.

John Hesketh was the manager of Barclays Bank in Sandbach and onetime chairman of the Chamber of Trade and Commerce. (It was also his idea to have plants placed at the roundabout on Hightown.) Sheila Johnstone worked temporarily at Foden’s but had been trained at the Old Vic, Bristol, and was friendly with Donald Pleasance and Patrick Wymark. She was very theatrical, apparently, and could often be found, perched on a bar stool, at the Military Arms. Her husband, Brian, had a part in Coronation Street.

The Ross family – who had come down from Scotland - were stalwarts of the Society, she said. Alec Ross owned the carpet shop in Alsager and in Crewe. Their three boys – Neil, Ian and Stuart – went on to hold positions, including President, in the Society.

The Sandbach and District Caledonian Society was officially formed in October 1958 and met at the Literary Institution. Caledonian Societies didn't have prescribed activities but usually celebrated St Andrew's Day, Hogmanay and Burns' Night. For the latter, the haggis was sent down from Edinburgh by train. On one occasion the Sandbach group's didn't arrive on time and they had to chop up a fruit pudding!

Hogmanay was celebrated at a time (the early sixties) when it hadn't become popular in England. It caused quite a stir as the members set out from the Literary Institution to do some first footing, calling on Dr Milner's house and then on to the Military Arms before dropping in on the houses of members. During the construction of the M6 a number of Scottish engineers were accommodated in caravans at Peartree Farm in Betchton. On one occasion, members piled into a car, drove to Betchton and celebrated Hogmanay, drinking whisky in one of the caravans.

At the dance events there would usually be a band consisting of accordion, bagpipes and fiddle. Sheet music wasn't easily available but Cath Jones's music shop in Congleton Road was usually able to source it from the publishers. Top bands would sometimes come down from Scotland – staying at the Swan and Chequer - and on other occasions the gramophone records of Jimmy Shand and His Band were put to good use.

She explained that the Scottish dancing at the Caledonian Society was actually English country dancing with highland music and footwork. In their day, the dances were popular social events but they faded in popularity as ballroom dancing took over.

Ms Smedley mentioned Jean Millington who was a physical education teacher in Scotland and had learned Scottish dancing from her mother. She introduced Scottish dancing to her pupils in PE lessons and in 1923 she co-founded what was to become the Royal Scottish Country Dance Society. She recorded dances she had seen and created new ones, and is credited with standardising and popularising Scottish Country Dancing across the world.

The Cheshire branch of the RSCDS meets at Tarporley. Sandbach is not a member – being involved with social dancing – but is a member of the Lancashire and Cheshire Federation of Scottish Societies which maintains a range of Scottish cultural activities.

With a large number of members, the Society formed a junior section. Later, the older members of that section formed their own group. Apparently, they had more enthusiasm than technique but nevertheless took part in local displays and shows. On one occasion, when taking part in a show at Bradwall Village Hall, they followed the chicken sale and had to dance amongst the tables covered with feathers and blood!

Social activities were an important part of the Society and everyone was involved. Outings to the seaside, a visit to the panto at Christmas and many parties were organised and it broke down barriers with members coming from different parts of society, different schools, different employment and different areas of Sandbach and beyond.

It also had a good record of fundraising for worthwhile charities, particularly Springfield School in Crewe catering for children and young people with severe learning and complex needs.

By the late sixties, the Society was advertising for more members. The access to the motorway probably had something to do with this, said Ms Smedley. People found it easier to move out of the town for education, employment and entertainment.

Ms Smedley ended by expressing her particular thanks to Helen Lawrenson, the elder daughter of Harry and Hilda Elder, for her invaluable assistance in researching this history.

The Society still meets each Tuesday evening at the Literary Institution and membership is currently around 30. The junior section kept going until 2015 when it became non-viable due to low numbers.

*John Higgins*