

# Dryfesdale takes centre stage

**ALMOST** four years since it first opened, more than 10,000 people have enjoyed the facilities of Lockerbie's Dryfesdale Lodge Visitor Centre.

It has become a showcase for the town's historic past and to display local talent.

And an open day from 10am to 4pm on August 25, will encourage locals and visitors to come and see for themselves how it has grown from strength to strength.

**By Sharon Liptrott**

Years of lobbying by local people led to the unused and rundown former cemetery lodge — used as the grave digger's homes — being transformed into the popular community and visitor centre it now has.

Rented from Dumfries and Galloway council on a peppercorn rate, £80,000 was spent on repairing and renovating the building for its opening day on October 25, 2003.

The cash came from the Lockerbie Trust through monies given in the outpouring of public grief in the wake of the Lockerbie Air Disaster.

And, fittingly, a quiet room is particularly appreciated by those who want a moment of contemplation after visiting the cemetery which includes a memorial to those who died in the 1988 terrorist atrocity.

Known as The Dryfesdale Room, it also gives the chance to reflect on the tragic murder of former Lockerbie



**CHEERS:** The amazing oak bog goblet which is 2,000 years old.  
Photo Ref: FS 421607

Academy pupil, Helen Jones the only Scot to be killed by the July 7 London Bombings two years ago.

Furnishings from the 'Scottish' courthouse at Xamp van Zeist fit out the centre with modern seating and on display are many gifts sent to Lockerbie from across the world since the disaster.

However, the centre also offers two

community rooms which are just as popular, along with toilets and the chance of shelter in poor weather — something the cemetery previously lacked.

Trustee and volunteer Frank Ritchie said: "We are now getting up to 3,500 visitors a year."

"As well as local people, who come to view the different exhibitions we stage here, we receive visitors from all over the world."

The centre has been open from Easter to the Christmas period. It closes on December 21 — the date of the air disaster.

"This year we have had to extend our opening days and times so we now open Tuesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday from 10am to 4pm," said Frank.

He added: "Still run by a trust, we started off voluntarily but as well as the volunteers we have had to take on some paid stewards — that's how successful it has become."

"The council gives us a grant and, with donations from visitors, we have managed to pay our heating and lighting costs each year and to expand."

"We now have a computer system where visitors can get access to information on all tourist attractions in Dumfries and Galloway, maps etc. This is also proving popular."

Frank is also responsible for staging the exhibitions which run during the season.

Currently there is one of local Ro-

man activities — which has been popular with schoolchildren — Dalton Pottery, a drama group, Hallmuir POW Chapel, Samye Ling Tibetan Monastery and Centre and the Galloway Craft Guild.

"It is a chance to showcase what there is in the region and we also have brochures on many tourist attractions and accommodation outlets," he said.

"We are keen for anyone who wants to stage an exhibition to get in touch and our rooms are available for use by local organisations to meet."

"There was even a funeral service held in here once because the weather outside was so bad."

Boards in the rooms have become a focus for national comment on terrorism and there is a photograph and letter from the family of an American fireman, Christopher Alexander Santora, who lost his life in the 9/11 terrorist attack, who thought it fitting to write to the lodge.

Secretary of the trust and local historian John Gair says the centre has also become a focus for Lockerbie's historic past.

He has pulled together a fascinating history on wall boards which takes visitors on a trip through pre-history and the Romans to the Drak and Middle Ages, local families, the Battle of Dryfe Sands, the growth of the town through roads and rail network, and the Lockerbie Air Disaster.

Among the collection of treasures is a bog wood goblet with an astound-

ing history.

The late Bill Cormack, a retired solicitor in Lockerbie who became a distinguished amateur archaeologist, found the 2,000-year-old piece of oak bog wood in Mochram near Port William in the Machars.

He gave it to a local man, Henry Rogerson, who used his skills to fashion it into a beautiful polished goblet.

And there is the puzzling large sandstone-carved coat of arms which was found three years ago hidden inside a bridge.

The 18th century stone slab bears the Johnstone coat of arms but mystery surrounds which building it came from, how it came to be in the bridge, and from which branch of the Johnstone's does the coat of arms come from.

Trustees are hoping as many people as possible will call in on the open day and they will be able to add their name to the ever-expanding visitors' book.

In just the last pages filled are comments from visitors from Northern Ireland, Anglesey, Yorkshire, Surrey, and the USA including the Mayor of Annapolis, Ellen Moyer.

They range from "wonderful place" to "unforgettable experience — thank you", and "very moving" to "impressive and sensitive commemoration."