

There's not much work to do in the woodlands in the depths of winter. So the timing of Burns' Night is excellent. For the Portmoak Community Woodland Group it's a chance not only to commemorate the Bard but to celebrate another year of progress and activities in Portmoak Moss and Kilmagad Wood.

We held our Burns' Supper on Saturday 27th January in Portmoak Village Hall and with 110 people there it was a sell-out.

Our principle speaker was Professor Robert Crawford of St Andrew's University and before we even got to the haggis we had him read his poem, Scotch Broth, 'A soup so thick you could shake its hand'.

I think we were all relieved that our new caterer, Extraordinary Eating, focussed on delicious rather than too thick!

Dr Bill Carr addressed the haggis disguised as a Prussian officer in the service of Lord, the Duke of Marlborough. He entered the hall wearing a plague mask and a red cloak as worn in times of plague in Venice - which later in the evening inspired a clever haiku from the audience, in our community poetry competition. Not for the first time, you wish Burns was still alive to witness the flights of fancy sparked by his poems.

Chloe Vlasto and Kirsty Buchanan did excellent work as reciter of the Selkirk Grace and as Poozie Nancy, while Tom Brown piped in the massive haggis.

In the run up to Burns' Night there had been controversy in the media over Burns' love life. Was he a 'sex pest'? Prof Crawford, who has written a detailed, up-to-date biography of Burns, met this head on with a frank presentation about the poet and his attitudes to and treatment of women. As with all aspects of Burns' life, it was complicated.

Jeff Gunnell and Krys Hawryszczuk proved how tricky relationships can be, between lads and lassies, with a hilarious toast and reply. The lads sang Green Grow the Rashers O and the lassies responded with Comin' Through the Rye. Our accompanists for all the community singing were Lynne Hope and Mike and Craig Lithgow. The Lithgows also performed Burns' songs and one of Craig's own compositions. The Portmoak Players accompanied singer, Jo Falla, in Burns' songs arranged by Haydn, as well as another work by Robert Crawford.

Elaine Carruthers, a great favourite at our Suppers, recited John Anderson My Jo and A Lass wi' a Tocher.

Fundraising efforts were boosted by a unique bird table (in the style of Mondrian) made by Matt Hogg and by Tom and Corrinna Norris who provided the whisky.

Ours is not an entirely conventional Burns Supper and it ended, as usual, with our own toast - 'Mosses, Waters, Slaps and Stiles' in which Graham Smith, a member of PCWG, gave an entertaining, illustrated account of the previous year - a year which saw activities as diverse as time travel in the Moss and road mending at its entrance.

Will we have as much to talk about in another year's time? Please watch this space and our website www.portmoakcw.org.uk for the usual programme of activities in the woods and orchard. Meetings, to which all are welcome, continue to be held in the Well Inn, Scotlandwell on the third Tuesday of the month at 7.30pm.