

Executive Director's Annual Report for the year 2023
Annual General Meeting, March 26, 2024

2023 marked the 50th anniversary of the Cole Harbour Rural Heritage Society; 50 years since the CHRHS formed to champion the natural and cultural heritage of a changing Cole Harbour, an initiative which today is reflected through an incredible coastal park system, a vibrant wetland environment, a much cared for built heritage, and a wonderful community space and farm museum.

Highlights – The John Bragg Award

The year opened with many exciting developments, not least of which was being awarded one the inaugural John Bragg Awards, an initiative by the John and Judy Bragg Family Foundation, celebrating the legacies of inspiring people who have shaped Atlantic Canadian History. The application process for this award began late in 2022 with a letter of intent. When we think about inspiring people who have had a lasting impact on Cole Harbour and the wonderful cultural and natural attributes enjoyed by the community today, we easily land on the legacy of Rosemary Eaton. So much so that the project concept almost suggested itself, and was formed around the idea an outdoor classroom and wetland interpretation, adjacent to our little Settle Lake marsh, at the western side of the Farm property. Early in 2023 we received word that we were invited to submit a full application and in May, recipients were announced. Just 3 recipients were chosen from across Atlantic Canada, and only one in Nova Scotia, which was us! The award invests \$50,000 in our project as well as promotion and support from award partner, Canada's History.

If you have walked the grounds over the off-season months, you will have noticed that the outdoor classroom has been constructed and we are now in phase two which includes the interpretative panels as well as a few additional structural features including a sun shade, accessible bridge access as well as play elements. We have engaged local wildlife artist Jeff Domm in the creation of the panels and we are very excited about the design concepts Jeff has created. We hope to have a grand opening of the outdoor classroom in summer 2024.

Bringing the Farm to Life - Spring Campaign

In spring 2023 we launched a new Annual Campaign strategy, designed to remind the wider community about the Farm Museum and all it offers, as well as broaden our base of supporters. This effort was guided by fundraising consultants Sargasso Philanthropic. The campaign launched just after season opening, in late May, and was well received with many new donations, as well as incredibly generous contributions from long time members and friends. The initiative raised approximately \$10,000 over and above the donations we typically receive in a year and I am incredibly grateful for this amazing response.

Wild Weather Woes

It was about this time, with the Farm Museum open for season, that the rains began and continued through what would be a trying and difficult operating year. Like so many, we experienced repeated flooding, electrical damages and an almost impossible event season. We unfortunately experienced financial losses through the electrical damage, to such things as our security system, our external wifi network and even our dishwasher! We had to let go of several events, including our extremely popular Fibre Frolic (which was rescheduled and cancelled a second time!) and endured a soggy garden season and terrible mould issues in the barns. On the bright side and most importantly, we suffered no notable damage to museum collections and persevered with a rainy anniversary celebration on July 3 – marking the actual 50th anniversary day with an enormous cake, live music in the Settle Barn and quite a respectable turn out!

Our Heritage Event

By fall we were in the thick of planning the star event of our anniversary year; Our Heritage, a evening of music, story and art. This idea had been bandied about for a few years as we imagined a new major fundraising event for the organization. And our anniversary year just seemed to be the time. A few things had fallen into place to enable us to make that leap; we secured a venue date at the much-in-demand Alderney Landing Theatre, we found a wonderful event host in the person Clary Croft, and we piqued the interest of Eastlink who agreed to be the event sponsor. With these three key pieces in place, an incredible evening and cultural celebration took form. The hinge pin in getting everything started was Board member Jon Stone; the evening would not have happened without him. Jon and Clary together developed an incredible musical line up representing the founding cultures of Nova Scotia. To round out the evening program, we organized a wonderful auction of all local goods, services and experiences, and the Rose and Kettle Tearoom created a decadent dessert tasting menu for the intermission. Finally, a dynamic event “brand” and marketing materials was created by Program Coordinator Makayla Cole, pulling the evening together and helping us to launch an evening we were so incredibly proud of.

The Meeting House

With assistance of both the HRM Community Grants Program and the Provincial Built Heritage Conservation Fund, the Cole Harbour Meeting House received a new cedar shingle roof late in the year. This is just part one of significant investment needed for the Meeting House but probably the largest single item, and we are happy to report that despite the appearance of advanced deterioration, the roofing boards underneath were solid and dry – indication that the old shingles were still managing to do their job.

The Farm Museum Season

Despite the rainy weather we still managed to have a lively season at the Farm! Six summer students joined us once again advancing exhibits and collections management, caring for the animals, grounds, and gardens, providing tours and enhancing visitor experience, and helping to run a full four weeks of our summer Farm Camp Program. We had a full farm animal program with pigs, calves, poultry and lots of sheep, thanks to our farming partners Winding River of Stewiacke, the Zillig Farm of Scotch Village and Rocky Creek of New Ross. An expanded Garden Buds Program, year two of a Federally supported garden program for seniors, hosted 15 garden volunteers every Friday, investing in our gardens, while developing new skills and having fun learning about everything from nutrition, to crafting and creating as well as garden folklore. We did manage to squeeze between the rain showers a sunny Strawberry Social, the biggest ever Movie Night in the Farmyard, and the return of a jam-packed Ghostly Gala with the Storytellers Circle of Halifax and the Helen Creighton Society.

Early in the season three members of our organization participated in the Ducks Unlimited Wetland Education Program in Shubenacadie. This enabled us to become a program delivery partner for DU and add our own little wetland to their list of urban educational resources. Sadly, we let go of our pop-up market last year. We had found 2022 to be a slower year for the Wednesday afternoon market and struggled to maintain vendors. And so we decided to take a pause. Seeking other options for our own surplus produce, we applied for a small grant under the new Provincial Food Accessibility and Literacy Fund to build a market stand in the garden. This was successful and in August Kevin Thomas built us a charming covered market stand where produce is made available on a pay what you can model at any time of the day. Garden staff and volunteers maintain the stand to ensure whatever we have is harvested. Board member Mary Ann Lapierre, who continues to sell at the Halifax Market each Saturday, also contributes any remaining produce she has and so by the fall the little garden stand became quite productive. We plan to continue to expand this offering in 2024. We were delighted to have our Introduction to Blacksmithing workshops resume in 2023 under Kevin Thomas's tutelage and look forward to offering this on a more regular basis going forward.

Collections Management work was furthered with significant work in archival arrangement early in the year, and the creation of new as well as refreshing of existing panels in the Settle Barn. The collections inventory and re-organization continues to advance each season. Collections Manager Heather will share full details of all of the work completed in 2023.

The Rose and Kettle Tearoom had an excellent year with continued growth and the return of Feast in the Farmyard in August and a brand-new Holiday Tea in December. The tearoom has a great following of food experience seekers and these events sell out very quickly. The tearoom and gift shop continue to be a pillar of the organization's fundraising. Foodservice Manager Paige will be sharing more about her work and goals with the tearoom.

We do not have a separate Environment and Programming Report this year. As costs rise all around us and fundraising needs grow to try to keep up with our pretty substantial obligations; built, operational and programming, we have found it impossible to maintain a third senior staff position. This is a great loss for the organization. Some of the initiatives I have mentioned above; Farm Camp and Garden Buds are two of the big ones, have been discontinued in 2024. I would like to extend huge thanks to Emma Agombar and Makayla Cole who have worked with us in this capacity over the past several years and given so much of themselves to the organization.

Fundraising

2023 was a very strong year of giving from our community, members, and donors. We learned during the pandemic years when events fell away just how critical this revenue is and the need to nurture and grow these contributions. With the help of the anniversary campaign mentioned above, donations grew to approximately 35,000 last year! This includes visitor donations as well as generous contributions from the Bell Heritage Trust and the Westphal-Cole Harbour Firefighters Association along with many private contributions. This is something we can be incredibly proud of.

The Our Heritage Gala had a very strong first year with nothing but compliments from attendees and promises to return all around. While we are still evaluating next steps for this event and how best to move it forward and bolster its fundraising potential, we feel this event will only grow.

A 50th anniversary sculpture, created by Blacksmith Kevin and inspired by the Cole Harbour Saltmarsh was a hit. Kevin created 50 of these limited-edition pieces with all proceeds going to the Society. We are incredibly grateful to Kevin for his continued dedication to the organization and the Blacksmith Shop, and always seeking creative ways to contribute.

Looking Forward

While 2024 will be a slightly quieter year program wise, I remind myself every day that just maintaining and opening these rich heritage spaces to the public each year, is a pretty incredible feat. The soon to be completed outdoor classroom will further add to the offerings and enjoyment of the site. Our dedicated volunteers and summer staff will be here caring for, beautifying, and interpreting the space, chatting with visitors and sharing their knowledge.

We do still have plans to invest in accessibility improvements at the Farm though these have been pushed to the fall of 2024. Another exciting new fundraising event is in the works, in partnership with the Cole Harbour Parks and Trails Association, celebrating Cole Harbour's natural heritage.

In Memoriam

We lost a few very long-time members last year and early this year; one of whom was Sally King. Sally was extremely active with the Society in the early years and a life long supporter. Sally, along with Joan Slack, hung the wall paper that we see today in the living room of the Giles House, carefully researching and selecting a fitting paper. We had plans to change the paper as it now has some tears and other damage but in honour of Sally, we will now have her paper conserved by a paper conservator, so that it may continue for many more years to come.

I recently learned of the passing of Robert Ritcey last summer, son of the late Murray and Mildred Ritcey. Robert (Bob) lived in Calgary and I met him only once during a visit to Nova Scotia about 10 years ago, but ever since then he would email and ask questions about the organization, show interest in our projects, and always sent words of support and praise.

Earlier this year Cole Harbour lost Murray Elliott, a consummate community volunteer. Murray was a huge help to the Farm when it came to parades, loaning us a trailer or a tractor, connecting his church to the agricultural history of the area through his interest in rogation services, and sharing memories of his years delivery milk for the Woodlawn dairy in the 1950s and later as Cole Harbour fire chief.

I recently learned of the passing of Rick Fletcher as well. I never really knew Rick but I do remember, ever since I was a child, seeing Rick drive Helen Fletcher to every Society event and activity, always making sure she could attend, and Helen attending everything!

In closing, I wish to thank the numerous individuals and organizations who have supported and continue to support our works, in a multitude of ways. Of special mention is the Dartmouth Horticultural Society who has been beautifying our gardens for over 25 years, maintenance volunteers Paul and Wayne Bonang who are on site most every Saturday, and all of the members of my family who help me with pretty much everything. I would like to thank the Board of Directors, for their guidance and dedication, and all of the energetic new ideas which are coming forth. And a huge thank you to my (slightly smaller) team; Heather, who assists me in all aspects of the operation as well as keeps our collection moving forward, and Paige and Magali who continue to imagine, evolve, and amplify what is possible in one small kitchen.

Respectfully submitted,
Janice Kirkbright