

# Historic uniform goes on display

NOW ON display at the Historylinks museum in Dornoch is this stunning and well preserved military uniform worn by a colour sergeant in the Sutherland Rifle Volunteers in the late 19th century.

The uniform originally belonged to Bonar Bridge man William Allison Bethune whose grandson, retired chiroprapist Dennis Bethune (pictured here) of 7 Church Street, Dornoch, donated it to the museum.

Born in June 1858, William lived all of his life in the family home at Bridgend, the little cottage on the north side of the Bonar Bridge which had been built by his father Donald, a baker.

William married Margaret MacLeod and the couple raised a large family of six daughters and three sons. His working life was spent as a river pilot, steering boatloads of coal, salt and timber through the dangerous narrows between Portmahomack and Bonar Bridge.

Approaching ships would sound their horn while at sea near Portmahomack and, hearing it, William would cycle from Bonar to Newton Point, join the ship and guide it through the shifting sands of the Dornoch Firth to Bonar Bridge wharf and back again.

He enlisted in the Bonar Bridge Company of the 1st Sutherland Rifle Volunteers as a young man and by 1881 had gained the rank of sergeant. He must have looked a handsome sight dressed in the kilt and scarlet jacket with its brass buttons and white piping.

He was an excellent shot, and for many years competed at the National Rifle Association meetings at Bisley in Surrey, reaching the final stage of the King's Prize in 1893. He was a regular competitor until 1920.

In 1910 he was discharged, but re-enlisted in the 2nd Volunteer Battalion of the Seaforth Highlanders during World War I. He was finally discharged from the army in 1919.

William died in November 1944, aged 86, shortly after suffering the heartache of losing his son Daniel, who was killed by a sniper's bullet while fighting in Northern France in the last years of World War II. Another son died in childhood.

Dennis, whose father was William's remaining son, Duncan, does not remember his grandfather well but recalls he had a moustache and a reputation as a great shot. After his death, William's uniform remained at Bridgend, which was occupied by members of the family until recent years.

Said Dennis: "The last living member of the family, my aunt, was leaving the house to move to Dornoch and the uniform was still there, so I asked for it with the intention of giving it to Dornoch Heritage Society." However, before handing it over to the society, Dennis recalls first having a little fun with the uniform, putting it on one night and going round to the home of some friends where he knocked on their door and gave them the fright of their lives!

Historylinks curator Peter Wild said the uniform had been

in storage for some time, pending the construction of a special metal-lined display case. Metal is required, as wood has been found to rot fabrics.

Volunteer museum worker Sandra MacGruer, Dornoch, a keen knitter and sewer, was enlisted to make the dummy on which the uniform is displayed by padding out a framework with wadding.

Said Mr Wild: "The uniform is in excellent condition and we are really delighted to have it. If you go to the museum at Fort George you can see a similar uniform, but it is quite faded and not nearly as good as our one, so we are really very lucky."

● Highland volunteer regiments were first raised during the Napoleonic War between Britain and France. They were disbanded at the end of that war in 1815. However, the threat of French invasion in the late 1850s led to the re-formation of many volunteer forces.

The Sutherland Highland Rifle Volunteers was raised in 1859 and in 1864 became the 1st (administrative) Battalion, Sutherland Rifle Volunteers, based in Golspie. It consisted of five companies, based at Golspie, Dornoch, Brora, Rogart and Bonar Bridge. In 1867 the battalion adopted the Sutherland tartan kilt and belted plaid. The 5th Bonar Bridge Company was formed in 1868. These were part-time soldiers, not regular army units.

In 1881 the battalion was incorporated into the 5th Seaforth Highlanders, a Territorial Army unit based at



Dennis Bethune with his grandfather's uniform, now in the Historylinks Museum in Dornoch. Picture: Gavin Wright, Dornoch.

Fort George. However, it retained its distinctive name, the 1/5th (Sutherland and Caithness) Battalion and its association with Sutherland. It mobilised and moved to France in May 1915 as part of the 51st Highland Division, where it fought in the Boer War along with the 2nd Seaforths and between 1908 and 1914 was known as the 5th (Sutherland and Caithness) Battalion of the fiercest battles of the 1914-18 war, after which it was disbanded.