

Prestonpans' rich tapestry loses some colour as Baron says bye

● The former Baron of Prestoungrange in his baronial robes

● by Sam Berkeley

HE HAS been a central figure in the transformation of Prestonpans from a town struggling to cope with the loss of its mining industry to a regional centre for history and the arts.

But Dr Gordon Prestoungrange remains modest about his own importance in all that has gone on in the town since he first pitched up and bought the title of the Baron of Prestoungrange in 1997.

Thirteen years on, aged 73, he has now retired and relinquished the title – which now carries little in the way of formal powers but can, as he's shown, be a great force for good – to son Matthew.

Once the snow clears Gordon will be heading home to Northampton for good – though hopes to get the odd 'invite' to return now and again to catch up with dear friends.

"Prestonpans was a fantastic town with an incredible history before I got here," said Gordon.

"I arrived at a particular moment in time which turned out to be a fascinating moment to be here. I happened to be here at an exciting time when folk happened to be willing to do something.

"There's been things happening all the way along Prestonpans and it's not just been me doing it but if I've left a legacy it's been suggesting using the arts to do it.

"I'm not an artist, I'm a writer who's written over 30 books, but we've defined art as anything that isn't science."

And since arriving in the county as Gordon Wills, he has turned his energies to countless projects to further the arts and history scenes in Prestonpans.

From murals and totem poles around the town to regenerating The Gothenburg pub, creating the Prestoungrange Arts Festival and playing a major part in the Battle of Prestonpans Tapestry, he has been a busy man.

Having grown up in London, Gordon always wanted to return to the county where his Musselburgh-born mother grew up.

And when he decided that acquiring a barony could be "a bit of fun" he plumped for Prestoungrange because of his family connections with the area.

It didn't take long for Gordon to embark on his arts mission in the town. On a visit to Prestoungrange Mining Museum, his tour guide Jane Bonnar "burst out laughing" when hearing he was the area's baron.

When Gordon asked her what she would do if she were baron, she responded she would invest



● Well-known archaeologist Dr Tony Pollard, pictured next to Gordon and the Battle of Prestonpans 'battle bus', shows off some of the real-life battle items found from various digs of the battle site

igate the history of the town.

This he duly did and together with other local history buffs he helped produce a book detailing the town's history – though it struggled for success. But a chance visit to the small Canadian town of Chemainus was to change all that.

"We'd produced this lovely book and virtually no-one was using it," Gordon explained.

"But what happened next was we were in Canada on Vancouver Island. My wife's always wanted to see A Midsummer Night's Dream on Midsummer's Eve and my sister said it was on in Chemainus.

"So off we went and it turns out this sawmill town of 15,000 people attracts 400,000 people a year. That's because they hadn't written their history, they'd painted it in murals.

"I thought to myself, if they can do it why can't we?"

And that philosophy has underpinned many of go-getter Gordon's projects in the town. Never one to sit idly by and wait for others to do something, he has always been prepared to get things done himself.

Despite twice being refused planning permission for murals "simply because they didn't think it was a good idea", he got round the problem because as baron he owned the foreshore opposite The Goth pub and was able to use the sea walls to paint the murals.

"People didn't object to them and it really dawned on us that by painting history people become proud of it," he said.

The murals opened a treasure trove of possibilities for Gordon; and he was more than willing to explore them. Of all the many projects he has spearheaded over the years, he singles out two particular successes.

"I'd consider my biggest successes to be getting the grass cut at Cuthill Park and restoring The Goth," Gordon said.

"The grass in that park had been allowed to grow and had been left because some young lads had gone there and knocked golf balls around and one of them had hit a double-decker bus.

"Because of that the town had been 'punished'. It didn't have a Christmas tree either because some kids had sawn it down years ago! But today, we've got three totem poles up there, there are annual Battle of Prestonpans re-enactments – all because we got the grass cut."



● The Goth pub

estry is also significant for Gordon as it is the first of his projects to involve the whole of Scotland – and he hopes that can help realise his ultimate aim of a Battle of Prestonpans history centre, for which MSPs are being petitioned for money.

"Almost by accident we have created a product in the tapestry to bring people to a living history centre who wouldn't have been expected to come," Gordon explained.

During his time in Prestonpans, Gordon has invested about £1 million, about half on The Goth and half on his other projects. But he will not be there to oversee the future of his various projects.

He has gradually stepped down from his various roles, with tapestry artist Andrew Crummy now chair of the Prestoungrange Arts Festival, and Gareth Jones chairman of the Battle of Prestonpans Heritage Trust.

Gordon will be selling his house in Prestonpans and moving to Northampton full-time, to be closer to his family. And it is not unfair to say that the new Baron won't be devoting quite so much of his time to Scotland as his dad did.

With his projects enjoying such success and strong leadership through others involved, Gordon says the time is right to call it a day.

"If you're running a football team and you sell off your star striker the balance of the whole team is upset," he explained.

"I flatter myself to think that the balance of the team changes when I go but I've spent a long time over the last five years making sure that it's about the team and not one guy banging in the goals."

Mr Crummy told the *Courier* that Gordon, publisher of Burke's Peerage, would be greatly missed. "I think he's played a very important role in the last 10 years," he said.

"He's tried to encourage new things to start and he's invested a lot of money.

"It's not all about Gordon, though; it's about a lot of people. But he's been an inspiration."

As for the future of the town he has called home for more than a decade, Gordon believes Prestonpans is a town on the up.

"My only concern is that it doesn't become a suburb of Edinburgh," he said. "To become a suburb is a terrible thing unless you have some unique identity, such as Notting Hill in London. But I don't think Prestonpans is in danger of not having an identity."

Jimmy Yule, chairman of Prestonpans Community Council, said of Gordon: "He's been a great guy for the 'Pans'. He's really put his money where his mouth is and done a lot of good things here.

"He pointed everybody in the right direction and he's done so much for Prestonpans in the arts scene."

Councillor Peter MacKenzie, who played a significant role in the formation of the Battle of Prestonpans Heritage Trust, said: "It will be a great loss to the area because Gordon has tremendous energy.

"I can think of nobody quite like him in the whole of Scotland who has such a sense of 'let's get on and do it'."

Councillor Ruth Currie, East Lothian Council's cabinet member for community wellbeing, added: "Dr Prestoungrange has enlightened an enthusiasm for the arts in Prestonpans.

"He's developed work which has brought many people together to create art, drama, music and a re-emergence of interest in the area's rich history.

"His support of various successful arts initiatives, such as the 3 Harbours Festival, has encouraged whole community involvement. I wish Gordon all good wishes in his retirement."



● ONE that got away... the Baron and the Prestonpans art community failed to stop the former Coeval building on Prestonpans High Street from being bulldozed. They had wanted to turn it into an arts hub for the town.



● Artist Andrew Crummy, Euro MP Alyn Smith, the Baron, and East Lothian Council leader Paul McLennan with sections of the Prestonpans Tapestry



● Gordon reads from his book, A Baron's Tale, while (right) Bonnie Prince Charlie (Arran Johnston) gets to grips with the Government forces during a re-enactment of the Battle of Prestonpans. Gordon was, until recently, chairman of the Battle of Prestonpans Heritage Trust.

