

# Communications – Review of the Year

## Phil Taylor

As the staff left for their Christmas and New Year holidays in the dusk of December 2009, it was clear we were all in for an 'old fashioned' winter. The fields and trial plots were frozen hard beneath a mantle of frost, topped with the first snows. Well wrapped walkers on the lane down to our home village of Invergowrie left vapour trails of breath as they trudged through the gloaming. And from a few of the glasshouses, where experiments were basking in artificial sunshine, long fingers of golden light probed upwards into the foggy night-time air.

Yet for many of us, busy planning the year ahead, we could already imagine the rumble of SCRI tractors and



machinery as the field and glasshouse staff got the growing season underway. We could hear children's laughter on open days and Staff Association barbecues, anticipate the eager questions being asked in The Living Field and glimpse the glasshouses green with seedlings or straw-filled with wheat and barley.



2010 was always going to be a pivotal year for SCRI: a year of life-changing decisions on the future of a famous and venerable institute. In the early hours of Ne'ers Day, one could imagine the faces of our previous Directors, peering out from the portraits opposite the SCRI boardroom in the hushed and deserted corridor. Their



only company were the abandoned Christmas garlands and cards on office walls. What would they be thinking – Messrs Swarbrick, Cadman, Taylor and Hillman – as SCRI's final year got underway with swirling snow and shivering gales?

Looking back, it might be a year told through the eyes of two very different visitors to SCRI. One a figure who is known to all...and who is particularly popular and appreciated in Scotland; the other, a youngster, just starting out in life and with hardly an idea of the work done at SCRI. That youngster, even now, is a bit of a mystery to us. More of both of them as we go!

The shivering months of December and January did at least allow SCRI to mark some new record breaking performances. At the Meteorological Station on the SCRI estate, the average minimum air temperature for December 2009 was -3.4 degrees Celsius, the lowest since records began in the days of the Scottish Horticultural Research Institute in 1954. January was also colder than usual, with another remarkable reading on 8 January when the 'low' was recorded at -9.4, the coldest for 26 years. Little did we expect how the year would end with eleven days of snowfall in November.

It may have seemed a long, slow haul away from the ice and snow that saw in the New Year, but it wasn't long before SCRI's annual cycle of events was underway. The institute has been a staunch supporter of the John Hope Gateway at the Royal Botanic Garden in Edinburgh. The Gateway was chosen for the launch in Scotland of the UN International Year of Biodiversity in the middle of January. The ceremony was hosted by the Scottish Government Environment Minister, Roseanna Cunningham MSP. SCRI coordinated the Scottish research institutes in preparation of a leaflet celebrating their joint contribution to the protection of the natural environment.

By Easter, SCRI was hosting another event at the John Hope Gateway: 'Potatoes Galore'. Over the Easter weekend, scientists and communications staff from Invergowrie gave hands-on advice about potato cultivation, told the story of the Commonwealth Potato Collection, gave informal presentations and also let a lot of children have a lot of fun with a large collection of Mr Potato Head toys!



Children were at the forefront again in early June, when LEAF (Linking Environment and Farming) Open Farm Sunday was hosted at SCRI. Among the highlights were



Heather the tractor driver!

the ever-resourceful team at The Living Field, open-access to the Meteorological site, an extremely popular display of farm machinery and several presentations on climate change given by the guest of honour for the day, Heather Reid OBE. Heather is a meteorologist and science communicator who first became well-known as the BBC Scotland TV presenter, 'Heather the Weather'. Her climate change presentations played to full houses.

There was a new departure for SCRI at the 2010 Royal Highland Show. With the pace quickening towards the creation of a new research institute, merging SCRI and the Macaulay Land Use Research Institute in Aberdeen, it was decided to share a stand at the show with our colleagues from the North. A common theme was chosen: the breadth of commercial services operated



Cereals in Practice, Balruddery Farm.

by the two research providers and the conversion of research knowledge into innovation and economic benefits. In the Royal Highland Education Trust building, where the focus, as ever, was on families and children, the SCRI team celebrated the UN Year of Biodiversity. The transition to the new institute was also promoted during SCRI's annual outing at the Dundee Flower and Food Festival. We also took the opportunity to promote the work now underway on blueberry cultivation.

Once again Potatoes in Practice, sponsored by the Potato Council, attracted more than 700 people who were able to visit field plots and demonstrations from SCRI, SAC, CSC Potato Care and others in the potato industry. Allan Stevenson, Chairman of Potato Council Ltd, used the opportunity to remind the visitors of the growing importance of the Chinese agricultural and food sector to the UK potato industry. He urged those involved in the industry to seize the opportunities that China had to offer. Mr Stevenson also paid tribute to Dr Stuart Wale of the Scottish Agricultural College. Stuart, who was one of the founding supporters of Potatoes in Practice, retired this year.



Royal Highland Show 2010.

Our regular, summer events soon followed in sequence with Cereals in Practice, boosted by our friends and colleagues from SAC, Fruit for the Future and Potatoes in Practice.



Potatoes in Practice.



The Royal visit, June.

2010 was always going to be a special year for SCRI as the transition to the new institute began to gather pace. But it became a memorable year on 7 June when SCRI, Mylnefield Research Services, BioSS and the Division of Plant Science, University of Dundee were honoured by a visit from Her Royal Highness, The Princess Royal, who is the patron of many, well-known Scottish organisations.

The visit had been eight months in the planning. The Lord Lieutenant of Perth and Kinross, Brigadier Melville Jameson, had been hugely supportive from the outset and paid a visit to our Invergowrie headquarters some time before the Royal visit. With Mel's help, obstacles were overcome and Buckingham Palace approved not only a visit to SCRI, including the brand new, multi-million pound AP Block glasshouse...but also a visit to

the Centre for Sustainable Cropping at Balruddery Farm in neighbouring Angus.

Her Royal Highness formally opened the new, glasshouse building, unveiling a plaque, and then enjoyed a private lunch in the SCRI boardroom. The buffet meal was prepared by SCRI's in-house catering team, operated by Sodexo, and included fruit and vegetable varieties bred at the Institute. Then, after the short journey to Fowls, Her Royal Highness inaugurated the Balruddery Farm centre, chatting to the staff and also meeting Fife dry stane dyker Robert Thomson, who had been commissioned to build a commemorative stone feature adjacent to Balruddery's old mill pond.

HRH The Princess Royal had not been scheduled to speak during the visit, but to the delight of the Chairman, Mr Peter Berry CMG and the Director, Professor Peter Gregory, she turned to the gathered staff and said: "Thank you for your invitation. This is a fascinating place and slightly too hidden a jewel, I think.

"It deserves more recognition and more understanding. But it's nice to see the investment here and I hope that will continue – that it won't just be 2010 you can be celebrating but many more years. Enjoy your new building!" After the Royal guest had departed, the staff and friends of SCRI were treated to a celebratory afternoon tea in the staff restaurant.





Visit by Roseanna Cunningham MSP.

We soon enjoyed the company of more VIP guests. During the Holyrood parliament's recess in August, we entertained the Environment Minister, Roseanna Cunningham MSP and later the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth, John Swinney MSP. Both represent neighbouring Perthshire constituencies and spent several hours meeting staff and looking at the potato and soft fruit collections and discussing the work of the Institute.

SCRI's commitment to education and the promotion of science to young people continued throughout 2010. Once again the Advanced Higher Days for young students were held during November. And the Institute, together with MRS Ltd again sponsored the Biodiversity and Environment category in the Dundee schools 'Focus on Achievement' awards. The winners this year were Craigie High School whose pupils maintain and develop the school grounds, including planting bulbs



Advanced Higher Day.



John Swinney MSP at SCRI.

and fruit trees and growing potatoes for local residents in sheltered housing.

It is right that in these pages we also celebrate our own, illustrious members of staff. Among them this year was a 36-year-old Hungarian scientist at SCRI who was awarded the Peter Massalski Prize for meritorious research. Dr Csaba Hornyik began working at SCRI in 2005. His career has seen many honours. He won a Marie Curie long term fellowship to support his research. His current research work focuses on the regulation of flowering time in the model plant *Arabidopsis thaliana*.

During the summer, the Director, Professor Peter Gregory, was elected to the council of the Royal Horticultural Society. The news was announced at the Society's annual meeting held in Harrogate. Immediately afterwards, Professor Gregory said: "I am honoured and delighted to be elected to the council



Dr Csaba Hornyik.



Ronnie Ogg (left) and Peter Gill.

of the Royal Horticultural Society. I hope I can play a part in maintaining the Society as one of the world's leading horticultural organisations and the UK's leading gardening charity." The RHS also honoured Field and Glasshouse 40 year veteran, Ronnie Ogg. Ronnie was presented with the RHS Long Service medal.

PhD student Susan Breen was the runner up in the annual Scottish research institutes student competition held at the Rowett Institute of Health and Nutrition in Aberdeen. Susan, a second year student working with the Plant Pathology programme gave a presentation called: 'Avr2, An RXLR Effector from *Phytophthora infestans*'. Susan, and her fellow SCRI competitor Jane Shaw, had been winners of the Mylnefield Research Services and Mylnefield Trust prizes at the in-house student competition earlier in the year.

There were long service awards (25 years) made during the year to Genetics Administrator Sheena Forsyth, Environment Plant Interactions Nick Birch and to Adrian Newton of Plant Pathology. The 2010 Director's Award, for an outstanding contribution by an individual to the life and reputation of the Institute, was won by Gaynor McKenzie.

John Bradshaw's extraordinary contribution to plant breeding was recognised by the award of the prestigious 2010 British Potato Industry Award. The trophy was presented to John at the Potato Council's Seed Industry

event at Crieff, Perthshire by Chairman, Allan Stevenson. John retired from SCRI in 2009 and has joined the ranks of the Honorary Research Fellows.

The institute bade farewell to several dedicated staff and associates during 2010. Field and Glasshouse Manager, Peter Gill, announced his retirement in February. A party and presentation was held in his honour a few weeks later. Also saying 'goodbye' to SCRI were Naomi Williams after a 32 year career that started in the former Mycology and Bacteriology department...and Jean Wilkie, who gave 22 years' service in first the chemistry department and latterly Plant Products and Food Quality.

SCRI's scientific successes through the year are detailed elsewhere in this annual report. But many of them also attracted headlines in the newspapers and coverage on TV, radio and the web.

In July, we learned that SCRI scientists had won no less than five grants from the Technology Strategy Board to fund research and development projects. The funding totalled more than £1.8 million and is earmarked for the development of sustainable crops and new, more resistant varieties of soft fruit, potato and barley. Director, Professor Peter Gregory was quoted in The Scotsman saying: "Our success at securing this funding underlines our position at the cutting edge of innovative research in the UK. These new projects will complement existing research at SCRI and allow us to come up with novel ideas and solutions to improve agricultural sustainability."

Other major funding awards included involvement in the £4.9 million QUOATS study aimed at developing new varieties of oats. It is funded by the Scottish Government, the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC), Defra and the Welsh Assembly Government.

SCRI scientists joined the North European ClimaFruit consortium, with a budget of six million Euros (£5.2 million) and with the goal of securing the long term future of the soft fruit industry. The Institute also joined counterparts in 12 other EU countries in a consortium seeking better ways to use legume crops. The Legume Futures programme, lasting for three years and costing four million Euros (£3.4 million), is being coordinated by SAC.



Hannah North.

The work of improving crops and joining overseas partners extends well beyond Europe. SCRI was awarded nearly £400,000 to help farmers in Malawi improve their potato crop. The Head of SCRI's Plant Pathology programme, Lesley Torrance, said: "Our work is having a real and positive impact. We will be able to help farmers increase yields and develop sustainable potato production and hopefully, in the longer term, improve food security and reduce poverty."

Finally to our visitors once again. The TV cameras were on hand in July when the granddaughter of the late Christopher North paid a visit to SCRI to see some of the North lily collection that has been traced and restored to health at the Institute where they were bred. Ms Hannah North spent some time looking at the lilies and commented: "It was something my grandfather was extremely passionate about and proud of. I remember seeing some of them in his garden when I was very young. It was only when I was older that I realised what an amazing thing he'd done!"

Lastly in this final annual review of the work of SCRI, we return to LEAF Open Farm Sunday. One of the new features for 2010 was an impressive display of farm equipment including tractors and a combine harvester. A



LEAF Open Farm Sunday.

few days after the event, a five year-old boy called Adam arrived at SCRI's reception with his grandmother bearing an impressive cake adorned with images of tractors. It was a gift for the farm staff in appreciation of the fun time Adam had enjoyed sitting playing on the tractors and combine. "A fascinating place" was the verdict of HRH The Princess Royal...and also, it would seem, the judgement of a five year-old boy who had the time of his life at an SCRI open day.

As we come together with the Macaulay Land Use Research Institute – to form The James Hutton Institute – it is perhaps a fitting end to this phase of our story. 2010 is not the *end* of the story by any means. Just as the Scottish Plant Breeding Station and the Scottish Horticultural Research Institute have lived on within SCRI...so our organisation will form part of the warp and weft of the new institute in the years to come. Our ambition must be to go on enthusing all those who visit us...whatever their station in life.

