



The National Trust
for Scotland

Balmacara Estate Quarterly Newsletter

Issue 17 – August 2004

A New Solution for House Sites in Plockton?

Yet another possible solution to the housing shortage in Plockton is being looked into. The crofters responded to enquiries from the Lochalsh & Skye Housing Association and the Trust about the possibility of releasing land at Carn an Duine for affordable housing by saying that while they recognised the need for housing they had concerns about the suitability of that site. An alternative area at Burnside, just south of the railway bridge, was suggested instead. If this area of land is approved by the Planning Authority and the Trust then the crofters would agree to its resumption from crofting tenure. The Planning Authority can only look at this site once the allocations in the current local plan have either been used up or discounted for practical reasons. Meanwhile, a paper recommending release of the Burnside area to the Housing Association for affordable housing, plus possibly a further six private sites at the Tin Church site, has been submitted to the Trust's Senior Management Team for consideration at a meeting on 14th September. Both of these proposals are merely in principle and there are numerous practical issues that will need to be resolved before any firm plans are taken forward. Access will be a problem at the Tin Church site and there are concerns about how to ensure that these houses do not simply become more holiday homes. The Trust is keen to work with the local authority to minimise this risk and we hope that progress can be made.

Integrated Rural Skills Training Programme

Over the past two months the Trust has been working with the Skye & Lochalsh Learning Centre Network (S&LLCN) to investigate the feasibility of setting up some kind of integrated rural skills training project. The study was split into two sections, with the first phase now complete. This phase aimed to establish levels of demand for training in rural skills, from both potential trainees and employers, and to consider different delivery mechanisms and partnerships that might be able to meet that demand. Currently training is often too expensive, uncoordinated or too time consuming. There is little connection with the school education system at present in Lochalsh and there is need to redress this. As a result of these findings we are now moving forward with phase 2 of the study where we will look in more detail at the potential partnerships and delivery mechanisms to establish what will work locally and what the costs and funding opportunities are. The second phase should be complete by the end of September and we hope to secure funding from various partners over the winter so that some form of training scheme, possibly including Modern Apprenticeships with the Trust, may be established next year. This is very dependent on the financial assessment to be carried out as part of phase 2, but we hope to improve links with Plockton High School through the Enterprise and Education programme possibly by setting up a vocational learning course for pupils there. This could offer training and experience in a range of work and activities on the Trust's Balmacara and Kintail estates.

Traditional Croft Land Use Survey

Over the summer months Barbara Soutar, Estate Conservation Officer, has been carrying out a survey of land use activity in four of the estate's crofting townships, namely: Drumbuie, Duirinish, Plockton and Port an Eorna. This survey is part of the wider study of traditional crofting activity on the estate that the Trust is undertaking. The survey has simply involved mapping which areas of ground are used for what types of land use, e.g. growing hay or potatoes, permanent pasture, turnips, etc. In addition to this field survey, over the coming months we intend to carry out a questionnaire survey of crofters on the estate. The questionnaires are now ready to be sent to each crofter on the estate and the aim is to clarify what level of activity each is undertaking and what motivates their activity or influences their plans and aspirations. The principal purpose behind this work is to determine if there is anything that the Trust can do to encourage the excellent traditional crofting practices that are so evident in some of our townships. We are concerned that current policies from government and Europe, alongside the direction legislative change is going in relation to crofting, are likely to undermine the viability of traditional crofting. If this is reflected in a downturn in activity, as many suspect it might be, there will be an impact on the landscape and natural heritage that may not be entirely beneficial. The landscapes associated with the best examples of traditional crofting, such as at Drumbuie and Duirinish, are increasingly rare and threatened and the Trust feels that this needs to be looked at very closely to ensure that we do not simply lose such uniqueness without doing all that we can to protect it. Thus when crofters receive their questionnaire we will be encouraging them strongly to complete them and return them to the office. Without this information it is impossible to understand the trends that are shaping the landscape and it is equally impossible to even begin to look at ways of countering negative aspects of these trends. Your views count and we will be happy to help people through the questionnaire on a one-to-one basis if that is preferred, but please do complete the form. We look forward to receiving the results with a considerable degree of anticipation.

New Secretary at Balmacara Estate Office

Following the departure of Sheena Finlayson from the Trust in May we have finally recruited a replacement. Jenny Hey moved to Skye last year having worked for two years for the National Trust in their Bath and Bristol office. Previously she worked with the National Association of Farmers' Markets. Jenny has undertaken the Scottish Crofting Foundation's Crofting Foundation course since arriving on Skye and has a keen interest in crofting matters. No doubt the crofters out there will keep her entertained with lots of interesting and varied enquiries!

Visitor Management in Plockton

On 19th July the Trust held a meeting in Plockton Village Hall to discuss issues relating to the management of visitors in Plockton. The meeting was very well attended with 24

people attending. The meeting raised various points but in general it was agreed that the biggest single problem centred around traffic management and signage. It was agreed that there would value in producing a visitor management strategy for the village including an examination of how to provide better visitor orientation/information and some kind of wet weather or museum facility. The Trust agreed to look into funding opportunities with the LEC to take forward the development of the strategy and also to consider utilising some buildings it has as an orientation point near the car park. This is a huge issue for the village and everyone will have their views of what is required. Community participation in this exercise will be of vital importance so readers are encouraged to attend subsequent meetings and to send in any suggestions, concerns or thoughts to the estate office. Another meeting will be arranged and publicised by posters, etc. in the village when we have made some progress on the action points from the last meeting.

Allotments – Progress Report

On 15th July the Trust had a meeting with some parties interested in setting up allotments at Reraig. The meeting was attended by 6 people looking for an allotment and we looked at the area of land that is available and what might be required to establish a successful allotment scheme. It was agreed that the current level of demand based on responses to previous articles in this newsletter, c.10 individuals, could easily be met by the land that was available, and indeed there was scope for a few more applicants. Thus if you are interested in horticulture then please get in touch because the level of demand will be an important factor in determining whether to take this project forward or not. Currently we are looking into access from the trunk road and planning permission issues, as well as the legislation behind establishing official allotments. We have another meeting set provisionally for 15th September by which time we hope to have more information on these subjects. If you are interested please contact the office and you will be welcome to attend the next meeting.

Japanese knotweed

This is a plant you may have heard about or come across on the estate. It is an invasive weed species found in Kirkton, Balmacara, Kyle, Badicaul, Duirinish and with a large site at Barleyport. Many people recognise this plant but may not know a great deal about it. Japanese knotweed (*Fallopia japonica*) was introduced to the UK in 1825 after being discovered in Japan by a collector called P.F. von Siebold. It was used as an ornamental plant and because of its growth rate, a fodder plant. It became naturalised in the UK in 1886 and began to spread and show its invasive nature. Knotweed, or Hancocks curse as it can be known, is a mid to light green colour in spring, grows very fast and tall with large heart shaped leaves and is very invasive. The plant is perennial with a root system that can spread up to seven metres from the stem. The only way in which the plant spreads is through vegetative means, by underground stems called rhizomes and by cuttings. All of the pure species plants in this country are female so the plant does not produce viable seed from the white flowers in late summer. However, even a small piece of Japanese knotweed, or a piece of broken root carried to another place, can create a new plant and a new problem. The

ability of this plant to spread and colonise ground after its naturalisation in this country has become such a problem it was made an offence to “plant or otherwise cause the species to grow in the wild” under the Wildlife and Countryside Act of 1981. It is also classified under the Environment Protection Act of 1990 as a “controlled waste” species.

In response to this species invading various parts of the estate the Trust has begun a programme of eradication which is expected to take several years. Most areas will be cut back and then any re-growth of the plant will be sprayed with herbicide. In most cases this approach will suffice, but at Barleyport, where the plant has colonised a large area beside the burn, it will be impossible to spray the vegetation because of the pollution risk. Thus we are forced to simply continue to cut the stands back on a regular basis and burn the debris on site. This ought to at least contain the spread of the plant to this area. Gardeners who have the plant in their borders are respectfully asked to try to remove it and to avoid dumping garden rubbish which may contain fragments of the plant as this is one of the main ways in which the plant has spread into the wild.

Environment Day

The Trust's Environment Day will be held at Auchtertyre Primary School on 14th September. The day consists of a variety of environmental activities provided by various organisations. All the Lochalsh primary schools along with Applecross and Lochcarron will be present. Enquires regarding the day should be made to Simon Franks at the Trust's Kintail office, 01599-511231 (email: sfranks@nts.org.uk).

Country Day Success Despite the Rain and Midges

It seems a long time ago since the 29th May but the memory of the midges is certainly fairly fresh in our minds. The Balmacara Country Day was perhaps a little less successful than last year but despite the wet weather and the midges it is estimated that over 300 people attended what was another great day. There were most of the familiar activities and events, including the Hill Race and cycle races, log sawing, stalls, etc. but a few new additions were there this year, and very popular they were too. The “watercolour challenge” was particularly well attended with Helen Robertson being kept busy throughout the whole day. Our thanks go to her for standing up to the midges for so long. One of the most popular attractions was the Dog Agility Course. This was a hilarious event with everyone entering into the spirit of fun. Jaime deserves congratulations on his ingenuity in designing the equipment for the course which we hope will become an annual attraction. The evening dance was another success with the Big Field Blues Band providing excellent entertainment to a very large crowd. Fiona MacEwan from the Community Council deserves our thanks for all her efforts arranging the dance.

Given the impact of the midges on this year's event, those of us involved in organising the event have decided that the Country Day will be moved forward to the Bank Holiday weekend at the beginning of May. Hopefully this will take the event forward to just before the midges arrive in force and with a bit of luck the weather will be kinder to us as well. So keep your eyes open for the posters for next year. Any comments, ideas, etc. please contact the Balmacara Estate Office.