



The National Trust
for Scotland

Balmacara Estate Quarterly Newsletter

Issue 15 – January 2004

Balmacara Estate House Sites Policy

Progress on the Balmacara Estate House Sites Policy has been slow as a result of the increased amount of debate about the rising house prices in Lochalsh and the possibility of house sites being released at Plockton. The Trust is currently experiencing high levels of demand and interest in house sites at several of its properties around the Highlands and Islands, most notably on Iona which is facing very similar pressures to Plockton. As a result the Trust has initiated a review of its housing policies at a regional level and a discussion document is being produced for internal discussion. While the Trust is not specifically constituted to provide house sites for locals it has a long history of releasing land for this purpose, contrary to popular belief. At Balmacara the Trust has sold around 140 properties or areas of land for housing since 1946, some of which have been for multiple developments such as at School Road and Wemyss place in Kyle and at Balmacara Square and Frithard Road, Plockton. Against this tradition the Trust will now be assessing what land remains that is suitable for development and on 23rd February, Iain Turnbull, Balmacara Estate Administrator, and Alex Lindsay (NTS Regional Director - Highlands & Islands) will be meeting Arthur McCourt, Chief Executive of The Highland Council, to discuss how best to resolve the housing problem in the area. Given the relatively large population living on the Balmacara Estate it is not surprising that there are now relatively few easily developed house sites left for release. Thus some of the areas under consideration already are looking less feasible, including the area behind the Clan Garage in Kyle. The time will come when there will be no suitable sites left and so while releasing land for housing does alleviate the immediate problem it will not provide a long-term solution. Agencies and government need to come together to find ways of bringing empty houses and second/holiday homes back into residential use if there is to be a lasting solution.

Winter Footpath Work

Footpath work on the Kyle to Balmacara path began in mid November on a one day a week basis with the Estate Conservation Officer, and local contractor Michael Hay. The identified priorities were two cross drains to take the water off burns that cross the path and surfacing some of the wetter sections, using up some of the materials that have been by the path for some time. Since then Barbara and Michael have been out in all weathers and can report that the cross drains are nearly finished, they have put in a water bar and some ditching to take run off and completed around sixty metres of surfacing, including joining up sections completed by previous groups. Work is concentrated at the moment on a stretch about a mile from the start of the walk opposite the old campsite at Balmacara. Work will continue in February with an extra person so it is hoped that good progress will be made in upgrading the path further.

Work of the Estate Conservation Officer

The last few months since the last newsletter have seen Barbara Soutar continuing with a range of projects, woodland surveys and a fixed point photography moorland survey, as well as getting dirty on the footpaths and controlling the spread of the invasive Japanese knotweed. The next few months will be busier still. The survey of the Duirinish woodlands will be continuing, looking at the woodlands themselves, what trees are there and how much they have, or haven't spread and mapping areas of regeneration but also looking for signs of badgers and other wildlife.

Wildlife monitoring in the next few months will include assisting wildlife consultant Roger Cottis in an Otter survey he is currently undertaking across the estate. Work will also begin on a dragonfly survey of lochs on the estate. This will involve two phases, the first being to find and identify the young, the larvae that live in the vegetation around the lochs, this will be done over the next two months. The second phase will be in the summer on warm days, identifying the adults in flight.

The footpath work will be continuing but Barbara will also be looking at other paths and fences on the estate to see what repair or maintenance work is needed. Other work around the estate will include maintaining the waymarkers and the removal of fly tipping waste at Loch Iain Oig.

If you have any queries, questions or have sightings or information regarding the above work Barbara is contactable on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays at the Trust office or by email at bsoutar@nts.org.uk.

Balmacara Square Management Committee AGM

The Balmacara Square Management Committee Annual General Meeting was held at the Haybarn Deli on 20th November 2003. Once again there was an excellent turnout of 16. Our thanks go to Jann MacRae for letting us use the Deli for the event. The election results for the new committee were announced with both Bob Anderson and Charlie Rennie being re-elected, so we have an unchanged committee for the coming year. A wide range of subjects were discussed but the main topic for the evening was the future of the forestry campsite and the wider forest area. Kenneth Knott from Forestry Commission Scotland came along to explain progress with the transition of the campsite to Woodland Park status and to outline the ideas included in the new Forest Design Plan for the wider forest area around Balmacara. A full copy of the plans for the Forest Design Plan are held for reference at the Balmacara Estate Office, if anyone wants to have a look please give us a call, although specific queries should be directed to Forestry Commission Scotland (FCS) (formerly Forest Enterprise) at Fort Augustus. The current plans for the Park are at an early stage with a meeting being held at Lochalsh House on 22 January between FCS, NTS and representatives from the Lochalsh Community Council and the Balmacara Square Management Committee (see the article below).

Balmacara Woodland Park

The future management of the proposed Balmacara Woodland Park was discussed at a meeting in Lochalsh House on 22nd January. The meeting consisted of staff from NTS, Forestry Commission Scotland (FCS), Donald MacKenzie (Chair of the Balmacara Square Management Committee) and Fiona MacLennan and Peter Grant from the Lochalsh Community Council. Kenneth Knott (FCS) explained that they hope to have the Woodland Park status confirmed by Easter and are seeking a suitable date for an official launch, possible linked with the Balmacara Country Day although probably sooner. The intention is to set up a formal partnership agreement between FCS, NTS and the local community. The community will be represented by members of the BSMC and the community councils in the area and invitations will be sent to both Plockton & District and Kyle community councils to nominate up to two members for the Steering Group. The Steering Group will be responsible for developing an Action Plan for the future use of the Park and any subsequent developments there and it is hoped that this group will be able to apply for grant aid to take forward a range of projects over the coming years. FCS are also producing the Forest Design Plan for the wider forest area around Balmacara and it is hoped that this will include additional recreational elements and the Park Steering Group will have a role in developing these ideas as well. Current thinking for the Park centres around the need for signage, parking, improved maintenance, and the possibility of creating sports and recreational facilities, although no clear ideas have been discussed as yet. Any suggestions are most welcome and should either be sent to Iain Turnbull at the Balmacara Estate Office or to Kenneth Knott at FCS in Fort Augustus.

Traditional Croft Land Use Survey

One of the estate priorities for this year is to carry out a survey of the level of traditional agricultural activity in our crofting townships. The pressures of the agricultural sector are ever increasing and nowhere more so than in the crofting communities. Against this background we have a trend away from retention of cattle and traditional cropping which is one of the principal environmental benefits of crofting. With this in mind, along with feedback on agri-environment schemes like the Rural Stewardship Scheme, we will be seeking views from crofters on the estate regarding what is needed to keep traditional crofting going and how the Trust can help. This will be done by questionnaire and ground survey over the spring/summer.

Integrated Rural Skills Training Programme

In the last issue of the Quarterly Newsletter we reported that the Trust had applied for funding from the North Highland LEADER+ Programme to carry out a feasibility study into setting up an Integrated Rural Skills Training Programme. The Trust's application to LEADER+ was approved in December and we are now working towards appointing a consultant to carry out the work. We hope to have appointed a consultant by March and have the feasibility study completed by May this year. Depending on the outcome of the study the Trust's Project Team will determine whether or not there is justification for taking the plans further with the development of such a training programme and seeking funding accordingly. We hope to have completed this assessment by September/October this year.

Balmacara Old Mill Hall

In the last issue we reported that after an approach from the Trustees of the Old Mill Hall the Trust were looking into the possibility of taking on the old building and finding another use for it. We can now report that, following the Balmacara Square Management Committee AGM in November, the Trust has put this investigation on hold. The reason for this is that alternative options were proposed at the AGM which were unanimously agreed as being of potential benefit to both the building and the community. The Trust stated at the meeting that we had higher priorities for our resources and we would be happy to see another viable and sustainable use for the building and we would provide as much support as possible to the project. The current proposal under consideration by the Trustees is to convert the hall into a training centre and exhibition space for Touchwood. Touchwood is the trading wing of the Skye & Lochalsh Social Firm Development Group which is based at Atlantic House, Uig on Skye. They have a recycling workshop and employ people who have disabilities or health problems, or who are long-term unemployed, offering training and making quality household and garden furniture from recycled wood. A considerable amount of work will be needed before a firm proposal to proceed with this proposal if finalised but those present at the AGM were keen to see it taken further. We wish both the Trustees and Touchwood the best of luck with this project.

Plockton Fencing and Cattle Grids

At long last the fencing and cattle grid project is complete and we will now have to wait until spring to see how effective it is. The Trust will be undertaking a snagging exercise with the crofters and representatives of the community early in the spring, once the cattle are back on the grazings, in order to ensure that there are no gaps or failures in the design of the scheme. Thereafter the community council have assumed responsibility for maintaining the vegetation and grass areas within the village since genuine concerns have been expressed by members of the community that the vegetation may become rank and untidy. This arrangement will last for the duration of the agreement with the crofters, i.e. 15 years.

NTS Junior Shinty Challenge Shield

The postponed NTS Junior Shinty Challenge Shield competition was held at Plockton on 11 November last year. This year the three normal contestants (Auchtertyre, Kyle and Plockton) were joined by a combined team from Loch Duich and Glenelg primary schools. The original format of the competition was also changed this year with the two top teams after the round robin stage going head-to-head in a final. After the group stage Plockton were top of the table followed by Loch Duich/Glenelg. However, perhaps the efforts of the round robin matches had been too much for Plockton who had a few close matches, and Loch Duich/Glenelg ran out clear winners in the final. This was an excellent performance for the newcomers and is the first time Plockton have not won the trophy. We will all look forward to seeing if they can defend their win next year. Special thanks are due to Johnny 'Ach' MacRae who once again turned out on a fairly poor day to referee the matches, and to the teachers and volunteers who supported the teams.