

# COIGACH HERITAGE

## Newsletter June 2021

**Welcome to our newsletter. Read on to find out what's happening...**

We hope you enjoy reading this latest newsletter in which you'll find out what we've been up to and what our plans are, along with some stories from well-kent local faces! As ever, many thanks to those who contributed and to everyone who volunteers their help and knowledge throughout the year. We're currently looking for new members: would you like to become a Friend of Coigach Heritage, for just £10 a year? Please email us for our bank details if you would like to set up a one-off or a yearly standing order. We've missed seeing everyone at our fundraising events and very much value your continued support. Hopefully it won't be too long before we can hold an in-person event: the Heritage Tea is much missed! And do watch out for our upcoming Heritage Calendar which is just about to go to print.

### ***Achlochan Coastal Heritage Project***

This interesting project is now nearing completion. The Achlochan peninsula is really special, with a history stretching back to before the Iron Age. Interpretation panels near to the remains of the broch and at the old firing range are now installed and all collected research material will be donated to the Coigach Heritage archive. As part of the project, we were given the chance to learn about family history research, tutored online by Anne Frazer of the Highland Archive Centre, in a fun and informative series of classes over the winter.



### ***Music and Tales of Coigach and Assynt***

This CCDC-led project is now into its fifth and final year and has seen young, local musicians mentored and recorded, tunes and songs collected, local people interviewed, new music composed and a book compiled. The book, *The Coigach and Assynt Collection*, is due to be published soon and contains songs, tunes, stories and dozens of archive photographs, much of which has not previously been published. Ronan Martin, the designer and musician who has compiled the collection, has worked with many people connected to Coigach and Assynt, including our archivist, Abigail Anne. While Ronan has been writing, musician and broadcaster, Mary Ann Kennedy and her team have been composing a new, album-length piece of music, inspired by the landscapes and people of Coigach and Assynt, due to be released later on this year. A new music and art project (also named *The Coigach and Assynt Collection*) began in May and continues until September, when we will see installations in the landscape celebrating our heritage and landscape.

## ***The Coigach and Assynt Heritage Trail***

Another CALLP-funded project and a truly collaborative one which CCDC are co-leading with Historic Assynt, working with researcher, Seoras Burnett. Coigach Heritage have been a huge part of this, again providing a wealth of knowledge about local places. Local individuals in Coigach and Assynt have also been extensively consulted. The plan is to produce a trail map of Coigach and Assynt, with links to online information, and for there to be information plinths and waymarkers at various points along the trail. As well as drivers, we're hoping this will appeal to walkers, cyclists and even canoeists; to both residents and visitors.



***“Is treasa tuath na tighearna”***

***“The people are mightier than a lord”***

Coigach Heritage is delighted to be working with internationally-acclaimed local artists, Will Maclean and Marian Leven, on a public art installation to commemorate the successful 1850s campaign in Coigach against croft evictions. Sheriff's officers were called in by the landlords and five times they travelled by boat from Ullapool to issue eviction notices. The community organised a highly effective rebellion, led largely by the women, to make sure no notices were served. It attracted the attention of national newspapers and was widely described as a rare victory for the people over a powerful landlord.

160 years on, it is time to commemorate this important chapter in our history so look out for more information coming soon.

***‘Is treasa tuath na tighearna’*** is an old Gaelic proverb and became the slogan of the Highland Land League whose action eventually led to the Crofters' Act of 1886, at last giving security of tenure.

### ***So... why did you come to live in Achiltibuie?***

Achiltibuie is a beautiful and unusual place to live and it has drawn many people from very different backgrounds. We often wonder why people came here and what made them decide to stay. Here are the stories from three of Coigach's long-term residents...

#### ***Jo Christoffersen***

In 1957, Jo was at Bristol University studying zoology and she took the chance to go on a field trip to the south of Ireland. Here she climbed her first mountain, Purple Mountain, one of MacGillycuddy's Reeks near Killarney in County Kerry. Her love of mountains stems from this trip.

Spring forward to 1983 and Jo, now 43, spotted a beautifully-written advert in the Lady magazine: an assistant manager was needed to help in a family-run hotel in the Scottish Highlands. Jo had been looking for a job: she needed somewhere which was happy for her to bring her dog and where she didn't have to do any cooking for herself and this sounded ideal. And it was in Scotland, which she'd never visited, but the idea of the mountainous landscapes appealed to her.



She remembers her interview with Robert Irvine, the hotel's then owner, at Fortnum and Mason in London. Robert announced that she was going to be doing the accounts, at which she was a bit taken aback as she had absolutely no experience, but he reassured her by saying, "Don't worry, dear, you have a degree. And, anyway, they make me ill!"

And so, never having done accounts, cleaned anything particularly well or poured an alcoholic drink for anyone, Jo travelled by car to Achiltibuie with her elderly yellow lab, Bob, taking three days to get here. Once she arrived at the Summer Isles Hotel she set off up a very steep learning curve!



She says she had the feeling, as the season wore on, “that for the first time in my life I was in the right place at the right time.” She has lots of memories of that first year, during which time she must have done every job in the hotel! She would climb mountains on her days off – Cul Mor, Ben Mor Coigach, Ben Mor Assynt, Suilven, Stac Pollaidh; she remembers how dinner at the hotel was “all about the drama”, beautifully choreographed and meticulously organised with notes written by Roberta stuck here, there and everywhere behind the scenes. The rules for dinner said the ice must go into the water jugs 60 seconds before the guests entered the dining room, then the soup must be served the moment the last guest sat down. The huge soup tureen took centre stage and woe betide any guest who was seen to be late. Her gentleman friend would come to visit some weekends and Robert was happy for her to eat in the hotel dining room with her friend, which confused the guests but she really enjoyed. And then there’s the story of the “Great Quail Robbery” but that’s for another time...!

She describes the Summer Isles bar, how she remembers overhearing mutterings at the bar that she was a “cailleach”, and later discovering that she had also been described as “vintage bintage” which amuses her; she remembers the political discussions and the humour in the pub, the warmth of the people and that she picked up a “sense of belonging”.

At the end of the season she didn’t want to leave and Jack Thompson offered her work as a housekeeper, which she accepted. This lasted two weeks and then she had to head back down to Surrey to see her grownup family.

But, she kept coming back – she was hooked! And in the late 1980s she grabbed her chance and bought the house where she’d been the housekeeper. And the rest, as they say, is history...

### ***Dorothy Miller***

Dorothy spent the first 25 years of her life in or near London, and the whole of the Second World War as an evacuee. She’d just started secondary school when she was evacuated, firstly to Maidstone and then to Bedford. She remembers being put on a train, along with other children, the whole operation being organised by the Women’s Voluntary Service. She recalls being marched through the streets and that there were lots of people willing to take evacuees. She was very philosophical, accepting things as they were, despite having various different foster parents, and remembers really enjoying life in Bedford. She wrote lots of letters home, which her mother kept and which are now in the Imperial War Museum where they have been part of an exhibition.

After the war, she went off to Royal Holloway to study for a degree in English and then worked for the Youth Employment Service before deciding to train to teach. And that’s when her life started to change direction...

Following on from a field trip to the Trossachs with the Hertfordshire secondary modern she was teaching at, she decided to head off on her own, hostelling, up into the Highlands to explore, first taking the train up to Mallaig and then heading over to Skye. She hitchhiked up to Ullapool, her first visit.

The next time she came up was with her to-be first husband, Duncan, a Hertfordshire teaching colleague. Duncan was from Milngavie and his father, a policeman, was from Achiltibuie and always kept in touch with family up here. On that first visit, Dorothy remembers staying at Acheninver Youth Hostel and Duncan stayed with his aunt in Acheninver.



Dorothy and Duncan both wanted to live in Scotland after they married and they initially worked in Morayshire, sometimes coming up by motorbike to visit Duncan’s Auntie Jessie in Acheninver. They also took the motorbike all over Europe, on one trip heading as far as Yugoslavia.

On one of their visits to the West Coast, they popped in to see Nora and Willie Uisdean who told them the school in Achiltibuie needed a teacher. Dorothy spoke to the Ross and Cromarty Director of Education, offering to help out at the school while a permanent replacement was found. She’d never taught at a

primary school and expected only to be needed for a couple of weeks. In fact, she ended up staying for six years! Duncan continued on in Morayshire, eventually coming to work in Achiltibuie. During this time, Julia was born, her first home being the Achiltibuie schoolhouse.

Then, time for a change, and the family moved over to the Black Isle, where Dorothy taught at the school in Culbokie. She carried on teaching after Duncan died, until she met Sandy, who was working at Dounreay and living in Muir of Ord. For a while they lived between Muir of Ord, Dounreay and Acheninver, finally deciding to settle here.



Looking back, Dorothy says of her life in the home counties that she “always yearned for something a little more exciting”. She had always loved seaside holidays to the Kentish coast, had always wanted to live by the sea, yearned for that feeling of freedom. Such a contrast to being hemmed-in by London streets! She took to Scotland, finding people here very friendly and very much liked the idea of living in a small community and knowing lots of people. She found a “sense of belonging” in Achiltibuie.

### ***Ken Lowndes***

#### ***Here's Ken's story in his own words...***

Before, when I've been asked, 'How did you come to settle in Achiltibuie? My stock answer has been 'How long have you got?' I then mention that it was all purely accidental in more ways than one!

In fact, my first comments, on the hill above the Village Hall, after I'd uncoiled myself from the back of an overloaded Mini on a drizzly, misty, midgey late evening in August 1975 was 'Who the hell would want to live in a dump like this?'

The answer... 'Oh, it's really nice here – there's all islands offshore...' didn't impress!

We proceeded down the hill with our carryouts, into the hall for my first ever Highland ceilidh dance.

Only five weeks before, I'd left Whangarei in New Zealand on board a 50 foot cutter-rigged sailing cruiser, with a crew of four, bound westward across the Tasman Sea to Australia and beyond, our ultimate destination wherever the mood took us... preferably tropical!



Only a day out, in a raging easterly storm, we were struck by a freak wave, a vertical wall of water, that turned us turtle and virtually crippled the boat. We were lucky to survive the knock-down.

The boat was a shambles, with no engine, no batteries, no radio, a split mast, damaged rudder and no accurate means of figuring our position. We struggled under jury rig and rudder southward, surviving another two gales before miraculously arriving back in New Zealand after about fourteen days.

Restless and unsettled, I soon decided to return to England and resume travelling, and booked a flight home. My mate offered to drive me down to Auckland, and about 2am on the morning of my departure, we left in his van after spending the best part of the day at a 'hangi' (Maori ceilidh).

Not a wise decision!

We were both tired and driving turnabout when I unfortunately fell asleep at the wheel and woke up, airborne and upside-down, flying off an embankment, down the bank, over a ditch, through a fence, to end upside-down in a paddock. The van was a complete write-off but we, unbelievably, walked away with only cuts and bruises... I jumped a bus south but I missed my plane, so I rebooked and got out the following day.

The flight was troublesome from the start, with delays in Sydney and Hong Kong, but we were on the final lap...surely...?

Not to be! The pilot came onto the intercom to inform us that, overnight, one of the engines had conked out and that he thought it unwise to be flying over the Hindu Kush with a non-functioning engine, so was diverting to Bahrain for repairs.

We arrived safely and proceeded to the arrivals' lounge for a complimentary meal and from where we could watch the mechanics working on the plane's engines.

Whilst eating, one of the passengers I was sitting with said 'This flight has been a bloody disaster from the start... We've got a Jonah on board... We should find out who it is and kick him off the flight!'

Laughter ensued. I wasn't laughing...!!

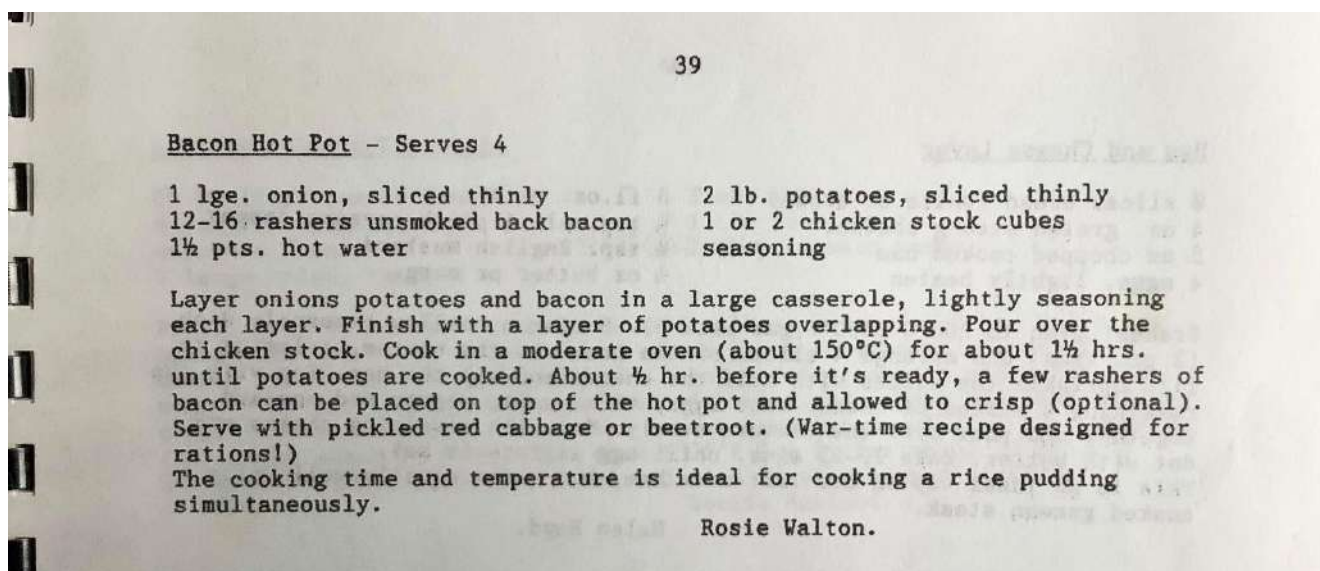
We finally flew out 24 hours later, after repairs, arriving in the UK safely, and headed home.

After only about a week at home, and still restless, I decided to push on and head back to New Zealand, via Iceland (don't ask!), so hitched north, deciding to drop in on a mate en route who was currently working as a night porter in an Ullapool motel.

I arrived, drenched, on a Friday evening, to be told 'Get into some dry clothes and get fed 'cos we're all off to Achiltibuie for a ceilidh dance.'

I intended staying the weekend... 46 years later and I'm still here... I never made it back to New Zealand!!

***And, finally... another recipe from the wonderful Coigach Cooks...***



### **Coigach Heritage Committee are...**

Mairi Thornton, Una Macgregor, Abigail Anne Campbell, Cathy MacNeilage, Julia Campbell, Veronica Vossen-Wood, David Green, Ali Macleod, Ann Marie Firth-Bernard



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