

ANN AN DOIMHNEACHD

ANN AN DOIMHNEACHD

The Big Read

Why I hope Bays of Harris estate will say 'yes'

by Dr. Calum MacLeod

The A859 takes you sedately from community-owned North Harris and along the island's picture-postcard, community-owned west side. I've always preferred the Bays Road, wildly hair-pinning through the Bays of Harris Estate, because it feels like the road home.

There's a rawness to the landscape into which the Bays' townships, including Ardslave and Manish where my maternal grandparents were from, are hewn. It's a quality captured in the Reverend John MacLeod's description of the area in the first Statistical Account of Scotland (1791-99) as "indented all along with harbours, bays and creeks and [exhibiting] to a spectator at sea the most barren aspect, appearing to be a continued bare rock. Near the shore, however, a few green patches are to be seen, brought into culture by the laborious industry of the inhabitants".

Not that the Bays' first inhabitants arrived there through choice. Landlordism cleared them without ceremony or compunction from the west side of Harris and beyond to make way for sheep and cold coin. The injustice of that enforced displacement echoes through the centuries in Reverend Alexander Davidson's testimony to the Napier Commission when it convened in Obbe one spring day in 1883: "It is most unnatural that man should be chased away

to make room for sheep and deer; that the land should lie uncultivated when men are perishing for lack of food."

The origins of the Bays of Harris Estate lie in the sale of Harris by the Scotts of Dunmore to Lord Leverhulme shortly after the end of the First World War. Disillusioned by his failure to create a Hebridean industrial utopia, "The Soap Man" offloaded the island in lots during the 1920s, creating the distinctive estate structure that exists today.

The Bays of Harris Estate of approximately 27,000 acres was one such lot, sold after Leverhulme's death to the Hitchcock family for £5,000 in 1925. A year later, in 1926, my father, Norman John MacLeod, was born in Ardvey, one of many townships within the Estate.

My father's parents were unmarried, a complicating factor in a Free Presbyterian childhood, leaving him to be brought up by his Aunt Kate on the croft in Ardvey where she was the tenant. Insofar as he belonged to anyone, my father belonged to her; a bond cemented to the extent that everyone in the village knew him as "Tormod Ceit" (Kate's Norman).

In the 1950s he built the croft house that became a home for them both with a £1,150 loan under the terms of the Small Landholders (Scotland) Acts 1886 to 1931, and stone hauled from the seemingly endless supply in the quarry under Roineabhal's shadow less than a mile away.

In 1985, my father came home to the croft inherited from his long-deceased aunt, having lived in Skye for

20 years. He returned as a widower with two teenage sons in tow, a month after the death of my mother, Mairi, who had been the headteacher at Vatten Bridge Primary School.

The house in Ardvey built decades earlier on the strength of a bond deeper than money provided a home for my brother and me when otherwise we might conceivably have had none. It's where we made a new beginning and where my father remained until almost the end of his life.

Nearly a century after Lord Leverhulme sold the Bays of Harris Estate, it remains in the ownership of the Surrey-based Hitchcock family. That may change. Residents will soon have an opportunity to shape the Estate's future when a postal ballot, organised and managed by Comhairle nan Eilean Siar on behalf of the Bays of Harris Steering Group, is held to establish whether there is support for a negotiated community buyout.

The forthcoming ballot follows publication of a feasibility study report commissioned by the Steering Group and prepared by consultants, Duncan MacPherson from Harris and Faye MacLeod from Skye. It shows that community ownership of the Estate is both financially sustainable and can help deliver the affordable homes, employment opportunities, support for crofting, and community projects urgently needed to reverse decades of population decline and ensure that the community throughout the entire Estate prospers.

Community landown-



The Bays of Harris Estate. Pic by Eilidh Carr.

ership has long been at the heart of Scotland's land reform agenda. The reason for that is because of Scotland's highly unusual pattern of private rural land ownership, of which 67% has been calculated as being owned by 0.025% of the population.

That concentration of private ownership is structurally damaging when it prevents local sustainable development as a result of landowners exercising the economic power of the land for their own benefit, rather than for the communities living there.

The Outer Hebrides have long been in the vanguard of the community land movement. The most recently available Scottish Government statistics, from 2020, show that 71% (135,795 hectares) of all land in community ownership is located there. Additionally, over 75% of the population of the Outer Hebrides now live on community owned land.

The extensive geographical reach of community ownership can partly be explained by the large scale of landholdings in the islands, as bequeathed by Leverhulme, which significantly

boosts the overall hectareage in community ownership when they change hands.

It's also a reflection of an increasing number of Hebridean communities' response to what, at its most generous, might be described as the 'benign neglect' of usually absentee landowners unwilling or unable to invest in the land – and by extension the communities – they control from afar.

Over the last 20 years, the communities of North and West Harris, Galsion, Carloway, Barvas, Pairc, Keose Glebe, South Uist, Eriskay and (parts of) Benbecula have all chosen to take the land where they live into community ownership when presented with the opportunity to do so.

They've been assisted in that by an increasingly supportive public policy environment, including a Scottish Land Fund that can award grants of up to £1,000,000 to help finance the purchase cost of the land. Such is the extent of community ownership in the islands that an umbrella organisation, Community Land Outer Hebrides, exists

to strengthen community landowners' voice on common issues and to support individual community land-owning trusts in their work.

'Socially just' use of land is one underpinning principle of community wealth building because of its capacity to generate significant economic and social value.

They may not call it that, but community landowners in the Outer Hebrides have been building community wealth for years. They've been able to do so because they own the land underneath their feet.

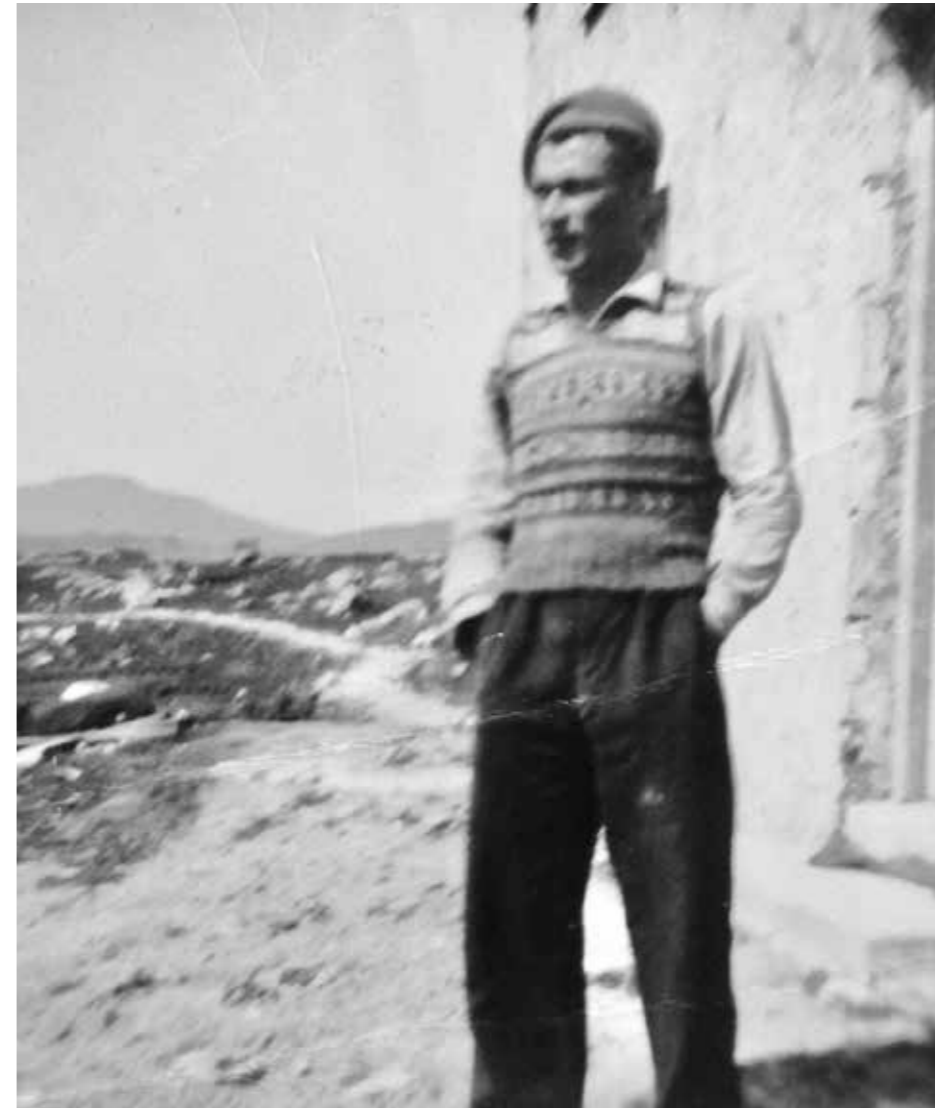
In West Harris community ownership increased the resident population from 119 in 2010 to 151 by 2020, has supported local jobs through the business units, offices and restaurant in its Talla na Mara centre, developed renewable energy initiatives, and providing affordable plots for housing. In North Harris the community land-owning Trust has developed affordable housing in Bunavoneader, made housing plots available, created business space, undertaken land management and environmental initiatives, and

established a community development fund distributing over £80,000 to community organisations.

In Lewis, income from the Galsion Trust's wind turbines at Ballantrushal is reinvested through its community investment fund to provide grants of up to £10,000 to groups undertaking projects that benefit residents of the Galsion Estate.

Some residents of the Bays of Harris Estate reading this may shrug their shoulders and say, 'we're fine as we are', as they are entitled to do. But what seems certain now might not be in the future. The owners of private estates change, and so might their priorities, as the ongoing situation in Great Bernera, comprehensively covered in the pages of this newspaper in recent weeks, demonstrates.

The Hitchcock family have indicated that they will consider a negotiated sale of the Estate if there is a 'decisive' vote in favour of pursuing a community buyout. By an accident of geography the Estate is highly profitable, recording an annual



Calum's father on his croft in Ardvey in the 1950s.



The signpost at the top of the the Bays Road.

income of £84,243 in 2021. That would leave the community in a far stronger financial starting position than has been the case for virtually any other community landowner in the Outer Hebrides, should a buyout of the Estate from the current owners be agreed.

It's worth noting too that that the Bays of Harris

Steering Group has indicated that there is no intention of raising croft rents if the Estate comes under community ownership though a legally constituted Bays of Harris Community Trust, representing the entire Estate and crofting interests on it.

There is no financial reason to do so, given the

significant annual income generated by the Estate for its current owners. Indeed, the Business Plan prepared by the consultants as part of the feasibility study makes clear that a community-owned Bays of Harris Estate would be committed to supporting crofting there.

The Business Plan further makes clear that the focus of the Estate in community ownership would also be on delivering affordable housing, business space provision, and support for community projects that benefit residents.

Against that background, the forthcoming ballot has significant implications for the Estate and its resident community.

A vote in favour of a negotiated sale offers the prospect of the Estate's future being shaped by the people who live there, for their collective benefit. A vote against leaves that future uncertain and exposed to factors beyond the community's control. For those reasons I strongly support voting in favour of a negotiated sale of the Bays of Harris Estate to the community.

Feel like a
fish
out of water?



Hook your dream job

by visiting

Jobstoday
jobstoday.co.uk