

A museum in the park

Rhona Hamilton, assistant curator of the Highland Folk Museum, discusses how the Museum has been affected now it finds itself within the Cairngorms National Park, and how it sees its future.

The Highland Folk Museum was founded by Dr. I.F. Grant on Iona in 1935. After outgrowing the space on Iona, I.F. Grant took her collection to Laggan and then to Kingussie, where in 1944 she opened the first open air museum on mainland Britain. This vision has been developed and the museum now includes a large open air site, three miles from the original, in Newtonmore.

The museum collection in Kingussie and at Newtonmore consists of both material and non-material culture related to traditional Highland life. The material culture, or artefact collection, is wide ranging, from heather pot scrubbers to a tin church, from folk art to a Lewis blackhouse. The non-material culture is perhaps even more wide ranging, and includes memories, stories, songs, processes and practices as well as language.

Like many organisations working within the Cairngorms National Park one of our main roles is protection. While others may be protecting forestry, birds or our natural heritage, the museum is protecting and preserving material and non-material collections related to the cultural heritage of the Highlands.

Although our core collection represents the cultural heritage of the whole of the Scottish Highlands (and in some cases the Islands), being part of the Cairngorms National Park does put much of it in a more immediate context for visitors. Our introductory DVD, funded by the National Park, sets the scene in this way. Being part of the Park is also helping us to fulfil other aspects of our work. Our aim is to use the collections we protect and preserve to provide inspiration, learning and enjoyment for everyone.

The following is a case study of a recent project, in which being part of the Cairngorms National Park has helped us to make local connections to tell an important Highland story.

Bothy Project

The Shepherd's Bothy and Sheep Fank are the most recent additions to the Museum's collection of traditional buildings and structures. This has been a partnership project with a local community within the Park, and one that has been partly funded by the Cairngorms National Park Authority. The Museum has worked with Laggan Heritage, a very active local community history group, to preserve the Presmuchrach Shepherd's Bothy and to recreate a dry stone sheep fank (shelter), using stone from a ruined fank near Dalwhinnie. For Laggan Heritage this preserves a local structure

and important local stories with it. For the Museum this bothy can help visitors learn about a way of life that has all but disappeared, and allows us to communicate the way of life represented by these structures.

In most parts of the Museum, much of the interpretation is provided through live interpreters, who interact with visitors. This method of interpretation also allows the process to be two-way, with staff enriching their own knowledge and understanding.

Due to their size and position on the site, the bothy and fank cannot be fully interpreted in this way. Much thought has gone into the planning of the interpretative text, however, so that visitors will be able to get as much as possible from the experience. Processes covered elsewhere in the museum through demonstrations (such as buttermaking, ropemaking and the pole lathe) will mainly

be represented through artefacts and photographs, although we will also be able to feature some sheep shearing as part of our demonstration programme. The two-way interaction which usually takes place between interpreter and visitor has also played a part in this project through the strong partnership between Laggan Heritage and the Museum. We have used the stories from Laggan Heritage members who lived and worked in similar buildings to inform our interpretation – preserving them for future generations.

As well as our role within the Cairngorms National Park, we also have a role as a local authority museum, run by The Highland Council. The Council's Gaelic Language Plan is something that is playing an increasing role in interpretation both here and at Inverness Museum and Art Gallery. All new interpretation will be in English and Gaelic, which will help to promote and preserve the Gaelic language.

Through this project we have added to our collection, increased community links and been able to interpret for our visitors a way of life that was important within the Highlands, but which has now changed beyond recognition. Being within the Cairngorms National Park we have also been able to look at ways of serving both our local and Highland wide communities. It has also opened up opportunities for developing partnerships with other organisations within the Park area.

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**Memory is a man's real possession. In nothing else is he rich,
in nothing else is he poor.**

Alexander Smith