

The Bob Harris Archive from the early days of the original Isle of Eigg Trust

a) Testimonies about Bob, sent by folks associated with Eigg for his funeral on 15 January 2014.

b) Bob's minute of the first Isle of Eigg Trust public meeting with residents on Eigg, 25 October 1991.

c) 3 of his letters to me about the Trust: 10 Dec 1991, 7 July 1992, and undated from the same era.

I have compiled this after being contacted by a student from Germany, Luisa Heine, who is conducting her research thesis, *The Transformative Power of Utopias: Investigating the potential of social utopias by looking at the visionary Isle of Eigg*. The first thing I told her is that none of Scotland's community land trusts will be found to be "utopian"! There are now some 500, covering very nearly 3% of Scotland's 19 million acres, but at the same time they are visionary, and most are a long way off from being dystopian. With Eigg, the limited vision of the four of us who were the original trustees in 1991 has been massively and wonderfully surpassed by the residents.



Phoenix, Bob Harris, Eigg Community Hall

For clarity, I describe the Isle of Eigg Trust as "the original". This was set up in 1991 using a traditional charitable trust legal form, without limited liability, by Tom Forsyth, Bob Harris, Liz Lyon and I. Calling it "the original" is to distinguish from its successor, the Isle of Eigg Heritage Trust (IEHT), which was set up in 1997 by the residents after most of the £1.6 million had been raised in 10,000 donations, to purchase the island in 1997 and to run it, democratically accountable unto themselves but in partnership with Highlands Council and the Scottish Wildlife Trust, under charitable and limited liability corporate status in law. One of my happiest moments was when the Secretary, by then of both trusts, Maggie Fyffe, asked me to send the lawyer a letter assenting to the transfer of the original trust's funds and the winding up of the old trust. Since 1994 "the original" had been run by a board elected by the residents (I was asked to stand and was elected by them, for continuity), but by 1997 it had completed its purpose.

The pages in this PDF have been compiled for Luisa's work and others who might be interested in the history. Importantly, they reflect the tensions both within the original Trust, and between the Trust and rightly critical Eigg residents in the early days. Bob was sheep farmer in Lochwinnoch outside of Glasgow, a local community counsellor and a poet. He was pivotal to the venture's credibility. After the buyout, and as Eigg's residents came to build their new community hall, which they had been not allowed to do under the private landlord, Bob made a stained glass phoenix to commemorate the transition. It would have given him great joy that the islanders positioned it in the top window of the hall. In 2023, Camille Dressler (Eigg's resident ethnographer and historian, and an elected director of the IEHT) had the image made into fridge magnets to raise funds for medical relief in the Ukraine war. That's the image placed above. Enjoy these papers as both history and as testimony to the visionary, practical, loving spirit of the great Bob Harris.

Alastair McIntosh, 6 Feb 2024

A sharing about Bob Harris, a founding trustee of the original Isle of Eigg Trust, at Bob's funeral

Compiled by Alastair McIntosh, 15 January 2014

Me: Bob always said that what he did on Eigg was the most important thing he'd ever done in his life. When Tom Forsyth first asked me to become involved I gave it a 1% chance of success. After I'd met Bob, that rose to 5%.

Tom Forsyth: Bob gave the early Isle of Eigg Trust credibility with crofters like Angus Mackinnon, because they saw the rest of us as very dubious.

Simon Fraser: I remember the day we finalised the deal to buy Eigg. I had travelled to Edinburgh for the purpose. That night I stayed with Bob and Shiela and Seumas. It was a great night and Bob was on cloud nine. He was very highly thought of in Eigg. His quiet practical common sense and his own farming background did a lot for the credibility of the cause.

Maggie Fyfe: Sad to hear about Bob also - he was a lovely man & we all have fond memories of him. Delighted we have 2 of his stained glass panels as a permanent reminder.

Camille Dressler: I will always remember the lovely time we all had with Bob and Tom together for one of our anniversaries and his beautiful symbol of the phoenix rising in the hall will always be there to remind us of his important role in our determining our future.

Me: That phoenix is positioned in the window at the head of Eigg's community hall. A couple of years ago we danced beneath it with 14 planners from the Indonesian province of Papua who had come to Eigg to study community development. The phoenix has spread its wings across the world, in so many ways, and I leave the last word with something that Tom said to me as we came in this morning.

Tom Forsyth: William Blake said that normally we see life only through a wee chink. But when the doors of perception are open, we see everything as it is – infinite. Bob saw with 360 degree spiritual vision.

c. 36 ² present at meeting in Egg Sea Room 25/10/91 plus children.

A.M.C. Spoke on the social history of the highland & Island community
Landlordism & its effect on the land. ^{Result} inner cities Highland &
Irish ancestry predominant. Time has come to change the
way of land ownership. Biblical references made.

Reason for choosing Egg - subject to a court order sale now.
Lord Leuchelme's speech to Lewis people, his dreamlike picture
of the effect of his methods and the response of one of the
community leaders. "will you give us the land?" the crucial question!

Purposes of the Trust explained - new concept of land ownership.

Question: Where are we now in fund raising?

Tom Answered bringing a example of Foula in passing

? Who would we be approaching.

A. answered on nature of fund raising work. Trusts Foundation etc
also Dr. H. C.E.C. Regional Council.

? Nature of investment? donation or investment?

TF. Donation preferred. Happy with a large donor to
be a Trustee - but only with one vote - not having major say.

On poss. of investment. Green investment perhaps for development

A.M. Interest payment on investment is unacceptable to him -
Jobs created within the island.

TF. Chief thing is to set up the Trust & get the backing of the
islanders.

A.M. Important issue - Is Trusteeship the type of ownership
you want, or is there nothing wrong with private ownership?

^{No response from audience}
TF. Spoke on Stonoway Trust.

R.H. story of large wealthy landowner prepared to sink a fortune
into a place with hope of profit is past.

~~TF~~? Once Estate employed everyone on island. Not now.

This ~~is~~ ^{is} better in his opinion that people employed by estate. Self reliance
TF Spoke on Siorraig situation & creation of local employment.

Part of our remit to encourage local people to find their own employment.

Marie. Is potential of this place enough?

TF. Potential great etc.

BH. The example of Foula as a success. Isobel quoted at length.

A.M. Rebuilding of community spirit, new ways of seeing the place we live in.

Amounts of money collected in Scotland for use in the 3rd world helping people to empower themselves yet we in Scotland do nothing for our own country.

? Why ^{has} the Trust been formed without the islanders knowing beforehand?

TF. Setting up Trust. He spoke to ^{broad spectrum of} ~~several~~ people on the island over the years. We are contact with the co-owners, etc.

A.M. Fair point made. ~~By~~

Many people giving their expertise because the Trust has been set up.

TF. Inspirational aspect of Cigg as a place, or him?

? Whose going to vet possible incomes?

TF. We want feed back from the islanders on these matters

? Genuine people are hard to know

~~Do you get~~

? Creation of holdings. crafts etc.

TF. Cannot create new crafts - small-holdings. Example taken from Lothian's experience of 10 acre holdings as base not total viability - other occupations also.

? How do you create new holdings?

TF. Example of Sronaig experience. Subdivision of his owncroft & givencrofting status. Sweeping of relative skills creation of local employment. Possibility of growth here far more than Sronaig, as community grows scope grows.

? Viability of holdings at the present time
Discussion

? Have to have prime producers to power any reversal of work situation
A bit of money coming in is a necessity.

TF. Back to Sronaig. Use of local materials wool/weaving pottery long breeding vegetable tree growing animal husbandry

(over)

Manufacture of wind generators, boat building.

TF's early experience^{eg} going away to work at various jobs.

A.M. Lounisa growth potential 2-3% per annum.

Employment added to community.

A.M. Employment of 50 on Lona by Lona Community during season.
Peace, retreats, spiritual wellbeing
? Retreat what does that amount to.

TF. Same as Lona eg. Police commander on Soraig, away from stress of modern life. Bliss.

? How do you control type of person who comes.

TF Control the numbers. Put pressure on undesirables to leave.

Ultimately put the boot in if necessary. Soraig experience at Samadon

? On water supplies & sewerage. sufficiency of ? for numbers.

TF Land use survey is a possibility

A.M. 200 figure in booklet is notional.

Never force an issue against the will of the majority of the island people

Management committee would monitor, with Trust, incomes.

TF Outlined Stormaway Trust method of selecting trustees
discussion of level of employment under Rencorian

A.M. Aim of Trust is ^{alleged} Trust document. read out.

? Are Trusts to be trusted

Guarantees given by AM & BH that should they ever receive a letter with a majority of islanders requesting his ~~retirement~~ resignation he (they) would do so.

TF. Outlined various bodies who approve the trust Crofters Union
& Dept of Agri officials etc

? Was Trust in perpetuity unchangeable.

A.M. Not if it became ~~too~~ unviable economically

? Scottish Wild Life Trust. questions on other Trusts.

A.M. Influence of community on ~~the~~ future ^{private} owners or

eg. investment bank you could ask for a meeting asking

what their commitment to the community was prepared to do for the islanders

The feeling of not being welcome. Empty houses. are

not as when people live in caravans. etc.

? you will listen to our voice

A.M. Yes.

If we receive ownership of the island. Agreement of majority of islanders would be necessary to do anything. Look at need of housing, land & so on and a growing of a sense of community. These places now seen as an escape but to reality & being seen in the centres of Europe as important increasingly.

? What would happen if a Trustee resigned.

TF Trust might not be seen as viable & would collapse.

TF Only person who has had to be sold the vote of a Trust is Schellenberg.

? Kind of people who might benefit from being in Eggi.

This place is precious in the modern world.

Development of the place as a community and as a retreat a healing place.

? When will island come on market?

Not know.

TF Lost out of ownership Schell & his former wife ^{have said} people should not be let down Schellenberg. ~~say~~ wildlife should be protected

Management committee is not written into Trust document
Lack of 1 trustee to make a legally binding decision tonight impossible ^{to take a decision} I personally thought the islanders should decide their position. Community Council decision? after consideration.

? If the co-owners agree this island could be sold to anyone.

Voice of the community has not been heard in this affair

AM A written statement on the support of the island community is necessary to aid us forward otherwise he would resign

Resident Group would be a suitable body to us?
Each household should be approached (considerable agreement)
~~Both~~.

Key issue ^{is} of Management Committee ~~take it~~
Should there be one boss man? Perhaps Hector, instanced
in Stormway Trust.

AM ~~of the~~ ^{are seeking} Restore the situation before Clarendons before they were
treated & acted as landlords.

AM. Costs of the enterprise in the Trust. Factoring costs. etc.

TF We have free legal advice. Some legal firms will
work free of charge. Sponsorship is available.

AM. Kinds of subsidy available. Community based applications
for aid from many sources European aid. Industrial (Shell)
aid etc. We have skills as Trustees in this line
which we have to offer.

High Linthells 10/12/91

Dear Alastair,

Coming home from our last meeting I had a lot of second thoughts on our approach to acquiring Eigg and I decided to postpone my visit to the island until I had clarified a few things in my own mind and got an answer from each of you on the following questions:-

Has each of you considered that we are carrying the responsibility for the future lives of about 70 people and that this responsibility is a serious business and not a game?

I have been delegated to face the islanders on land use but I have no doubt I will be asked to answer a lot of searching questions on our intended plans. Karen Helliwell says she has not got many hard facts to go on ^{regarding our intentions} but no more have I. This is a hot seat I feel ill prepared to occupy. These people are clearly not stupid and they will know a load of waffle when they hear it.

It is particularly in our approach to funding that I am perplexed. It is all very well for her to murmur "all will be well and all will be well" because she thinks it will be well. (which she does!). I have not yet got proof of her sainthood - as yet anyway.

It is all very well for you to cook up schemes to get the island for nothing, with a revolutionary government occupying the Lodge or whatever - "realistic" offers ~~included~~, or the highly unlikely happening of Keith & Maggie gifting the island or doing a private deal at a low price. They have both spent a fortune fattening the legal profession and they will be wanting to get the last bauble out of the place. That's the most likely happening in the real world.

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It is all very well Tom saying he is spreading the word as he travels the land (as he does) but where is the money?

Lis says we have done a lot in a short time, but after 5 months our liabilities still outweigh our assets by £1000 and we are all running up bills we cannot afford.

The fact is the island may come on the market in a few months. That's about 3 trustee meetings away at our present rate of travel!

Our time schedule does not allow us to work through the 3 strategies of fund raising outlined by ~~Alan~~^{you} consecutively. We cannot allow 1 to fail before moving on to 2 and then to 3.

Scenario: Suppose the island comes on the market suddenly, upset price £1,000,000 (not unlikely). Suppose we decide to make a meaningful offer of £15,000, raked up from somewhere. Supposing someone else has £1,000,000 to spend on this "collector's item" - or more than one - and it goes to the highest bidder. Can you imagine the fun the press would have at our expense? Can you imagine what the islanders would feel about us? Would we ever be able to set foot on the island again?

We have made statements about fund raising. We have led people to believe that that is our intention. I think we have to do this in a serious manner, otherwise we are being dishonest. I do not like this feeling of being dishonest.

I think the time has come for us to buckle down & find enough money to give Tom the opportunity to fund raise seriously. It's no good him living like a nomad and bumming around the country, however well adapted he is to this existence. He needs some security

to do the job and a base where he can work from and be sure he has enough to pay the grocer. He will also, no doubt, need to travel around at times and meet people, so he should have the price of a Band B in his pocket. Can we not, between us, find enough sponsors to assure him of an absolute minimum of say, £70 per week, for 6 months at least? That's £1820 in total. Are there 9 people who would give £200, or 18 who would give £100 to get this off the ground? I am prepared to put £200 into this & I will see what I can do to raise further money from other sources. Lis may manage a bit too. I shall write her also and Tom says he has had an offer of £500 from someone which he should put himself in the way of receiving ^{personally} rather than see it go into the Trust where he cannot avail himself of it; if that party is willing.

I have spoken to Tom about this and he is in agreement with what I am proposing.

I spoke to Karen Helliwell on the telephone a short while ago. I got the impression ~~she~~ they had intended to speak to me on the land question before they voted to back the Trust or not. Anyway too late for that now. Fact is I am stuck here for a few weeks as my son Seumas has ~~fallen~~ torn muscle fibres and looks like being crocked for a while until his leg heals enough for him to be mobile.

Thanks for batches of letters. You have been busy.

Bob

High Linthills, Lochwinnoch.
4/7/92

Dear Alastair,

Ten years ago I attended the 4th World Assembly (The first) in London. This Journal, edited by John Papworth, who founded Resurgence magazine, was born then. The Assembly, held in London University, was international and attended by some 400 people. Leopold Kohr ("The Breakdown of Nations") spoke and there were a number of forums (fora?) on various aspects of life and community as well as some stormy plenary sessions when the Anglo-Saxons were accused of taking over (as usual!). Fundamentally it's about what it says on the sub-heading of the mag.

I just heard the radio programme. Well, do such confrontations really get anywhere? I thought you made a number of very good points, but where were the islanders, those most affected, in all this? I thought a lot more could have been made of the empowerment of a community through being involved in its own decision-making & its own self-creation (4th World stuff) but it needs its freedom to do this. Keith did a fair amount of blustering. I don't think he's a bad man but pretty thick in a good few areas. As for public money, is there any community anywhere which is not in receipt of it? The poll tax only pays for a fraction of local government expenditure.

To take charge of your own affairs requires a lot of work on the part of the community, most of it done without reward, out of community spirit. I've spent 22 years in local organizations, much of it frustrating in the extreme. At the moment, I'd say, civic sense, that caring attitude for the place you live in and its people, has never been lower. Out of 3,000 people it's a job to muster a quorum of 8 here for a meeting to be conducted at all. Sad! Because the people who live elsewhere do not know best. The consultants do not know best, nor the officials who live in distant places and if they visit you at all, do so in a motor car. Listen to them by all means, but make your own decisions in the light of your own knowledge and understanding.

When Keith said the people up at Cleardale weren't making much of a go of it he spoke the truth but the reasons why were not clearly stated or rather were in some of your remarks, but not connected. I'm glad you praised him on his conservation of the wild life of the island. He seems to care genuinely here. I hope his daughter makes a good relationship with the islanders. I hope he does make his home there - more contact rather than less, but until everyone shares ownership in some way or other it will always be a them and us situation & the essential conditions for taking responsibility will not be met. Big Daddy rules. Yeah!

Since that first meeting in Edinburgh a year ago you have made an admirable spokesman for the Trust, Alastair and that coupled with the immense amount you have done on behalf of the Trust in other areas of endeavour have been tremendous. I hope you enjoy your break - you certainly deserve it.

I wonder if you had lunch with Schellenberg after the broadcast? I'll be interested to hear about that, if you did.

Best wishes

Bob

Now back to the shearing!

High Linthills

Lochmuniach

Sart

Dear Alastair,

I have received your post-broadcast letter.

You know, you are a most amazing person. Your ability to go on making constructive ideas out of what I would have considered a dead end, a chasm, an abyss over which no bridge could be ever thrown, astonishes me. There is an aspect of Keith, which was apparent at the Egg launching, that if he's allowed to huff & puff a bit he then settles down to being a not unpleasant person, full of errors no doubt, and ignorance of many things, but not bad. Maybe we could educate him into being a benign landlord. Maybe we could crown him with bay, as the man who did the right thing, reward enough for anyone in this life. Maybe he's maturing. All conjecture of course, but if this meeting you are suggesting can be got off the ground it would be wonderful for the islanders, for the Trust (if they are still required) for the elected representative & the local authority people, who so clearly are well motivated and wishing to do things for the island - and unprecedented!

Some quite heavy rain today. Badly needed.
My water supply is (was) down & out. I have a
new bore hole and I can see the water down there,
reflecting the sky dimly, but no pump & cistern rigged
up yet.

The demands of a farm are relentless & total.
Secunas has been off the road for months with
achilles tendon damage. I am thinking of giving
him limited partnership & phasing myself out. I
can't tell you how pissed off I am with sheep. I've
worked long enough. I'll do some dyking & plant trees
from now on. About 4,000 planned for this coming
winter incidentally, of all shapes & sizes, colours & breeds.

I am thinking of walking one of the 5 pilgrim
routes to Santiago next Spring, to celebrate my 70th
birthday. Some research still needed. I don't intend
to walk along motor ways. I think Arles, & Le Puy,
are the favorite starting points. I have a passion for
Romanesque architecture, so some detours, Moissac
Vézelay, Autun must be seen somehow, to satisfy
a very long yearning. Entering what must surely be

my last decade of this existence I mean to make
it meaningful, if, as they say, I'm spared.

I speak to you
I speak of you
I roam deep within myself
I know that you do not answer
How could you answer
When so many are crying out to you!
All I ask is permission
To stand here waiting
And that you will give me a sign
From within myself of yourself!
(Ekelöf)

Speaking to Isabel Holborn on telephone just now
telling her about the post-broadcast developments. Said
I'd send her a copy of your letter to Keith. She was
most interested in what was happening. Praised many of the
island people too & thought the island was wonderful.

Relax, look after yourself. Love, Bob