



Hut life

The stories of three communities

Here we tell the stories of three hutting communities in Scotland which have their roots in the tradition of the working man's rural escape – from the perspective of a hutter, a landowner and a visitor.

The social origin of hutting in Scotland is a tale of working-class city folk seeking a simple, tranquil refuge from the grime and drudgery of the big smoke. However, sadly, many of these original communities have been evicted or face eviction. The research paper *Huts and Hutters*, commissioned by the Scottish Government in 2000, at the time when there were upsets over Carbeth's huts, described the hut phenomenon as "the last bastion of an individual freedom 'to nest'". Though recent years have brought some success stories, notably for Carbeth, that freedom is under threat.

Clockwise from left: Gerry Loose's beautiful outhouse at Carbeth; A cabin at Lunga; A row of huts at Soonhope. Photos: Gerry Loose, Morven Gregor, Colin Lindsay-MacDougall, Brunton Hunter.

Carbeth, near Glasgow

One hundred and fifteen years ago, Glasgow socialist Sunday Schools met and enjoyed tranquility away from the bustle and pollution of the city. At Carbeth, in tents, they found a small haven: land not quite fit for agriculture, rocky and wet, but with glorious lifts of hill all the way to the Campsies, full of wildlife with a cover of native trees.

These early socialists were soon joined by others as the news spread – Clarion Scouts, rambling clubs, cycling clubs – all came in search of the freedom that simplified living may bring. The early canvas site

was large: a tented wooden dance floor, a shop and a community kitchen, and of course the necessary sanitation. The need for permanent huts was established early on and the landowner leased small plots of land on which, at first, community wooden structures were built. Then in the 1920s ex-servicemen built huts for their families.

Huts were simple and built along guidelines laid down by the estate owner. The guidelines, while in complete accord with today's notions of living lightly on the land, were in fact drawn up to minimise the

visual impact on his estate. Thus they were small and always painted green, hidden among trees and behind hedges. The hutting areas slowly grew as hut numbers increased.

The traditions of socialism and of refuge lived on: many of the Scottish contingent of the International Brigade who fought in the Spanish Civil War trained at Carbeth. Carbeth also provided a safe place for hundreds of families who fled the Clydebank blitz during the WWII. Many people lived there permanently, encouraged to do so by the then Clydebank Corporation, which made arrangements with the Estate for that to happen.

The early hut builders, indeed all who came to Carbeth, were working people. There was no spare money about and huts were built slowly from reclaimed timber. Foundation pillars were of brick, often brought in a couple or three at a time on the bus from town until enough were accumulated to start building. Slowly a community of 250 huts grew, some close together in comradesly fashion, others out by themselves under ancient oaks. All this in 300 acres of largely unmanaged land, with the exception of a little grazing a some early estate-forestry plantation.

Rents were small, manageable for shipworkers and ex-servicemen, as the landlord had envisaged. Huts were owned by the builders; the land on which they were built was subject to this small rent and a very strict

lease, allowing no security of tenure. Families grew up here, children were born and raised their own children – from the 1920s until the 1990s – all within a relatively benevolent patrician old-style estate ownership.

In 1997, however, the current owner raised rents to an unmanageable, unrealistically high level, leading to 14 years of rent strike. Which is where I came in. I'd previously stayed at Carbeth at the huts of friends and had used the place in the spirit in which it grew – for peace and quiet; for the simpler life. A year after the start of the rent strike – amid court cases, eviction notices and aggressive wardening (including arson), with hutter and Estate relations at their lowest – folk were moving out, wearied by continual strife which had changed the spirit of the place. My chance came to buy a hut and I seized it. The last to exchange missives with the Estate, I immediately joined the strikers in their search for social justice: a fair rent and security of tenure.

The story of how the old Carbeth Hutters Association with its fighting fund for court cases grew into Carbeth Hutters Community Company (CHCC) must be saved for another day. Enough to say that CHCC members negotiated with the Estate for 14 years: as slowly as the first huts were built through labyrinthine and Machiavellian talks, to secure that justice. There is a surprise twist – hutters have now entered a legal agreement with the

Estate to manage hutting areas, with a three-year option to buy. This is a genuine first: a negotiated community buy-out in central Scotland. Now we just need to find the money, but we'll never let the prize escape us.

My own hut is like many others: built some time in the 1930s by someone who'd saved enough money to buy a cheap off-the-peg prefabricated hut (not everyone's a builder!) from Cowieson's Designers & Erectors of Glasgow, as the small plaque testifies. It's been owned and passed on by a priest, a family, a comedian: all here for the quiet contemplation of the natural world.

The garden holds a small orchard of native apple trees, the first five fertilised by my mother's ashes. I am never done renovating this wee hut in the woods. A new wall this year, a new roof to the kitchen (there's only the kitchen and one other room) some years back. The outside cludgie was built by me – it's a two-seater – with wood from a dismantled fence. The floor and door are of pitch pine rescued from a Glasgow shop-cellar. There's part of me in every corner here; just like all the old hutters and their huts. There's also part of Carbeth now lodged permanently in me... I'll never leave.

Gerry Loose is a poet, writer and land-artist, and also Secretary of Carbeth Hutters Community Company, see www.carbethhuts.com, while his own blog is at <http://carbeth.blogspot.com>

Lunga, Craignish Peninsula



Above and facing page top: Caravans turned homes at Lunga. Facing page bottom: Hut at Soonhope. Photos: Colin Lindsay-MacDougall, Brunton Hunter.

Lunga, an Argyll estate owned by Colin Lindsay-MacDougall, has a different set of informal buildings. They cannot really be described as huts as most of them started life as caravans and are permanent rather than occasional dwellings. Nevertheless, they represent an interesting challenge to restrictive planning rules.

“It all started more than 20 years ago when they were building Craobh Haven,” says Colin. “It looked as if it was going to be a major development:

200 houses, with infrastructure to support both them and a yacht haven. The planners insisted that all of the roads, sewerage, and other services be installed before the majority of the development took place, rather than incrementally as they went along. The result was that the developers went bankrupt.

“By that time, a few businesses were already established there, a boat yard and a sailing school for example. These had brought people in to live on our beautiful piece of coastline.

Others had come to help with construction. They all needed houses. But there were none to be had, all the existing housing stock having had long since been bought up by weekenders or people retiring from city lives. This is the way in beautiful places. At the suggestion of the local authorities, those working people sought sites for caravans. They came to me, and I was able to offer them places dotted around the estate.”

The caravans are well spaced and often hidden by woodland. “People in the countryside need space for dogs, hens, gardens and places to store their logs. Over the years, most of them have been clad in timber and given extensions to make them more comfortable.” Owner-occupiers do this well, usually out of local materials. Many have changed hands as the first businesses at Craobh failed and their owners moved away. “When that happens, it is locals who buy them,” Colin reports. “I own the

ground, for which rent is paid, and the septic tanks and sewerage, as I have always wanted to be certain that the services were properly installed. The people own the structures themselves.”

The informal dwellings have continued appearing. Recently there has been a further round of fuss about them. The local authority called in planning experts from Edinburgh who carried out a new study, and spent money charting what was really already known. The result was that only about half of the 60 buildings were granted retrospective consent. The other half, officially, have to go.

“There is an issue about access,” explains Colin. “They only want houses to be served by roads that are fit to be adopted. There are miles of road, some of it not on my land. It just is not practicable to bring it all up to the required specifications.” There is hope that new waivers will be



negotiated. If not, about 40% of the people currently housed and happily living at Lunga, will lose their homes.

Colin Lindsay-MacDougall, owner of Lunga Estate, was speaking to Fi Martynoga.

Soonhope and Eddleston, near Peebles

Walk up behind the Peebles Hydro, in all its period grandeur, and you quickly enter a hidden valley. The huts start at the gate. A marvellous miscellany of styles, they sit on sloping ground either side of the Soonhope burn. Some of them date back to the 1930s, for you can see mock Tudor half-timbering on the exterior of a couple – a telltale design feature of that period. The slightly sagging roof-lines and general state of their walls and windows bear out this early date.



It suggests that they belong to the period of hut establishment during and after WWII, when there was a move for landowners to provide sites for miners, and later for ex-servicemen, to get out into the country and enjoy some fresh air and exercise. The huts in the Peebles area seem to have been built by miners from Rosewell, a mining village within cycling distance, a significant fact at the time. Eighty years later there are almost 50 huts on the site, which is still owned by the same farm.

None seems totally neglected and many are extremely well cared for. Neat, modern sheds, or adapted double garages, with hard edges and perfect roofs sit alongside ramshackle buildings with re-used Victorian sash windows and long, thin ones, like old fashioned scout huts. There are even some jokes. The best is an old railway carriage called ‘The Soon Up Sleeper’

(that’s how you pronounce the name of the farm). No one was around on the wet Thursday afternoon when I visited, but the hand-formed concrete paths and flights of steps, the tended flower gardens (no vegetables here, alas!) and well-maintained verandas suggest that these huts are important places for their owners.

There is another group of huts near the village of Eddleston, to the north of Peebles. These, too, had a mining connection. I spoke to an old man called Jack who has had a hut there for 30 years. “I hate the town! The hut is the only place where I feel happy and in touch with nature. They won’t let me stay there, but I go every day, summer and winter”. He wouldn’t enlarge on who the prohibitive ‘they’ might be, but I took his point. The simple living, without mains services, right out there in the fields, is a lifeline for him. It could serve so many in the same way.

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