

# Scotland's missing huts

*Lesley Riddoch compares ubiquitous cabin ownership in Norway to the steady erosion of hut usage in Scotland... and asks why these hutting histories diverged so greatly from their shared origins among working people in the 1920s.*

Norway has one of the highest rates of second home ownership in the world, with one holiday home for every ten Norwegians. There were 429,093 holiday homes in 2010 (plus 55,000 owned by Norwegians abroad) amongst a population of just 4.9 million people. More than half the population has access to a *hytte* for relaxation, connection with nature, exercise and strengthening family ties. Some are very fancy, but many are very basic wooden huts.

Grieg composed in a *hytte*. King Haakon rallied public spirits in the post-war rationing years by taking the public tram to the ski slopes above Oslo. Gerhardson, Norway's first Prime Minister, was regularly pictured in hiking gear. The Norwegian ideal to lead a simple life outdoors (called *friluftsliv*) is made possible by having a *hytte*... and that's made possible by the historic absence of large aristocratic estates. Norway is one of the world's most equal societies, but having a second home isn't regarded as elitist, greedy or wasteful. The *hytte* is the permanent family home – in contrast to 'temporary' urban dwellings which change to suit the demands of work, family and finance.

Across the northern latitudes the same attachment to cabins exists. In 1991 there was one cabin per 12 Swedes, one per 18 Finns and one per 33 Danes along with relatively widespread cabin ownership in Russia, the Czech Republic, Germany, Spain and other parts of central and southern Europe as well as the northern states of America and Canada.

Scotland is alone in having the lowest rates of second home ownership in northern Europe. There is one holiday home per 173 Scots (perhaps one per 200 since so many are owned by non-Scots). Here, second homes are generally regarded as elitist and problematic. This has always bothered me – not least because, for seven glorious years, I rented a cabin at Glen Buchat, 45 minutes inland from Aberdeen.

My 'bothy' (pictured) was owned by a local farmer and had been occupied by a farm labourer and his family until the 1940s. It had a great roof but no electricity or running water, and had become the domain of animals – it took years of weekend and summer stays to learn how to share that space with them. Rabbit fur and bones under the duvet simply meant the polecat had been in again. A herd of elephants dancing in clogs on the grey slate roof at night meant the mice were back. Cows wandered outside day and night – part of their cattle trough also served as my makeshift fridge.

I loved the freedom and the adventure. And I knew only a handful of people who felt the same. Once I was persuaded of the merits of country life, I moved to a small house with a garden in rural Perthshire and let go of the bothy. My house was soon filled with my responsible self and worldly possessions. My Norwegian balance of tame urban dwelling and wild country living was over. I had once again become a sensible, tamed Scot. But the experience never left me.

Since then I've always wondered why so few Scots have huts, cabins, bolt-holes and mountain retreats. Part of the reason, of course, is guilt. How can anyone justify owning or renting a second home when so many young locals struggle to find first homes? Eventually I started to see the problem differently. In a relatively empty landscape like Scotland we are reduced to fighting over scraps of land. There is enough land to accommodate far, far more people in all sorts of huts, cabins, mountain cottages and seaside shacks. So why won't Scottish landowners sell small patches of land? Why won't Scots demand it? Why do Scottish councils discourage hutters?

During the 1920s and '30s, working people in Norway and Scotland tried to escape the pressures and squalor of urbanisation by building huts outside the big cities. By the 1950s, Norwegian efforts had blossomed into a mainstream national cabin culture. In Sweden, the state even awarded

grants for hut building – they feared workers with newly acquired holiday rights might otherwise spend their spare time drinking. Scottish cabin efforts just fizzled out. In 2000 only 630 huts remained in Scotland – most without rights of tenancy or improvement.

Since then almost all have been evicted with the exception of Carboth (see page 13), whose hutter residents must raise almost £2 million to achieve a community buyout of their land this year. There has been landowner resistance to cabins and huts in the Scottish landscape for centuries.

That resistance has now generated indifference and even self-harming hostility to nature amongst many urban dwellers. Is it a coincidence that Scots have the lowest rate of hut ownership in Europe and the highest rates of problem drinking? How else can urban Scots 'escape' the pressures of modern urban life? The majority of Glasgow pupils aren't sure that eggs come from hens – is lack of connection with nature to blame?

I'm comparing the cabin traditions of Scotland and Norway in a PhD jointly supervised by Strathclyde and Oslo Universities. My thesis is that radically different patterns of landownership have produced a nation of 'rootless' Scots with nearly no experience of nature, and a nation of 'rooted' Norwegians with nearly no desire to spend spare time in cities. I'm hoping to demonstrate that this cultural difference accounts for dramatic health and social differences too. I'm going to write a book about the missing huts of Scotland – but first I need to finish the PhD. I'd love to speak to veteran hut owners in particular, so please do get in touch.

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