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'Brought Alight and Alive': Community reuse of Church of Scotland churches

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Abstract

The Church of Scotland, a ubiquitous built presence in communities across Scotland, aims to sell 40% of its properties between 2017 and 2027 in response to a continued decline in membership and a historical accumulation of churches throughout its history of schisms and reunifications. At the same time, there is a growing body of land reform legislation aimed at facilitating community ownership of buildings and land, including churches declared surplus to requirements. This timely research presents two case studies of community reuse of former Church of Scotland churches during this dynamic period, utilising ethnographic methods to investigate the experiences and perspectives of those involved. The first is Bellfield, formerly Portobello Old Parish Church in the seaside Edinburgh suburb of Portobello and now a community hub owned by Action Party. The second is Clachan Church, a small rural church located at the head of Loch Broom now owned by Clachan Lochbroom Heritage Trust. In considering these two case studies, this thesis asks why and how community bodies are formed to take ownership of former churches, problematising 'community' as a multifaceted and evolving concept that is unique to the circumstances of each project, and seeks to understand their relationships with these places as existing sites of significance. This research explores how community groups navigate complex mnemonic and narrative landscapes and develop both community and place identities through embodied engagements with the materiality of former places of worship. By describing and analysing two ethnographic case studies with differing circumstances, including community composition, building typology, and new uses, this thesis reveals diverse realities within the phenomenon of church reuse in Scotland and develops perspectives for understanding such projects, their motivations, and goals.

Lay Summary

Repurposed Church of Scotland churches can be found in communities across Scotland, from pubs to shops, nurseries, museums, and performance venues. This thesis is interested in contemporary reuse by communities themselves. Such a study is timely, as the Church of Scotland is in the process of selling an unprecedented number of buildings while the Scottish Government is producing legislation aimed at facilitating community ownership of land and buildings. Consequently, there will likely be an increase in communities taking ownership of former churches sold by Scotland's national church as it adjusts to a continued decline in membership.

This research utilises two case studies to explore the phenomenon of community reuse of former churches. The first is Bellfield, formerly Portobello Old Parish Church and now a community hub in the seaside Edinburgh suburb of Portobello, which was opened by Action Party in 2018. The second is Clachan Church, located at the head of Loch Broom and owned by Clachan Lochbroom Heritage Trust since 2018. Through these case studies I explore how and why community groups are established to take ownership of churches, as well as their experiences as they navigate relationships with and understandings of these places. The use of ethnographic methods centres the experiences of the individuals involved and allows for in-depth and nuanced insights into these projects of reuse.

These case studies reveal the diverse ways in which former churches are brought 'alight and alive' through reuse by their unique communities, from the vibrant activities of Bellfield to the deep sense of continuity at Clachan Church. In doing so, this thesis offers insights into why these places are valued and suggests perspectives for assessing other community groups seeking to take ownership of churches emerging from the Church of Scotland.

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List of Abbreviations

BEFS Built Environment Forum Scotland

CCT Churches Conservation Trust

CLBG Company limited by guarantee

CLHT Clachan Lochbroom Heritage Trust

CofE Church of England

CofS Church of Scotland

CRtB Community Right to Buy

HES Historic Environment Scotland

HIE Highlands and Islands Enterprise

SCIO Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisation

SCT Scottish Civic Trust

SLF Scottish Land Fund

RCIL Register of Community Interests in Land

Chapter 1. Introduction

‘We’ve always had too many churches because of our fabulous ability to schism,’ the director of Built Environment Forum Scotland announced in his opening statement at the 2018 ‘Keeping Church Buildings Alive’ workshop in Glasgow, referring to the complex evolution of the Church of Scotland and its resulting surfeit of churches. This educational and networking event was organised for the benefit of owners and potential owners of churches across Scotland that no longer serve their original ecclesiastic purposes. We were assembled at the Renfield St. Stephen’s Centre in Glasgow, a Gothic style church built in 1852 with a sizeable 1960s addition. A small but active congregation still used the sanctuary on Sunday mornings and religious holidays, but it was otherwise available for hire along with other rooms in the centre, embodying the day’s topic of keeping church buildings in use. The pews had been removed at some point in favour of flexible seating, now arranged around two rows of tables facing a projector screen set beneath the tall, pinched arch of a stained glass window.

The opening presentation continued with visualisations of results from a survey sent out to attendees prior to the event, half of whom represented community groups that had either succeeded in taking ownership of a former church or were considering doing so. This series of graphics created a broad image of the phenomenon I was there to learn about while exploring topics for my research. These projects of reuse were volunteer-run, their organisers having limited experience in managing buildings and building projects, and some experience in community engagement. More revealing than this data, however, were conversations with the four other individuals at my table. They represented two organisations that had recently succeeded in obtaining ownership of churches in their respective communities.

‘I still think it’s incredibly exciting,’ one woman said, undaunted by her preceding description of necessary building repairs being more extensive than she had expected. ‘I have this image in my head of it all finished and looking gorgeous and a hundred people queuing up to get married. A real vibrant kind of place. It’s great, and you feel like you’re doing something worthwhile.’ The other attendees seated around us were also ‘doing something’ by engaging with and reconceptualising former churches to keep them ‘alive’ after their original ecclesiastic uses had come to an end.

The lofty space pictured below was full of people from across Scotland with experiences and understandings that could not be captured by the statistics on display. Such detailed explorations of church reuse and the people and communities involved was not the intention of this presentation. However, I realised, I could make it mine. The two community organisations represented at my table were Clachan Lochbroom Heritage Trust, owners of Clachan Church near Ullapool in Wester Ross, and Action Party in the Edinburgh suburb of Portobello, who had reopened a former parish church as the Bellfield community hub. These became the two case studies presented in this thesis dedicated to investigating and presenting community reuse of Church of Scotland churches as lived and material processes through which these places and their communities are brought, in the words of one Action Party volunteer, 'alight and alive'.



Figure 1. A view of the well-attended 'Keeping Church Buildings Alive' workshop at Renfield St Stephen's Centre in Glasgow on 23 April 2018 (Photo by Built Environment Forum Scotland)

1.1. Project rationale

Church buildings in Scotland have been falling surplus to requirements at an ‘unprecedented’ rate since the 1980s in a trend that has only continued to accelerate (Scottish Civic Trust 2006: 5). In 2017, the Church of Scotland, representing 70% of ecclesiastic buildings as well as the largest number of designated heritage buildings in the country, announced its intention to dispose of 600 buildings by 2027 (ibid; Young 2018). This would amount to downsizing their building stock 40% over 10 years. Former churches given new residential, commercial, religious and other uses after being sold by the national church are not an uncommon sight across Scotland, however, the phenomenon of reuse by communities in particular is now occurring in a climate of both accelerated church sales and emergent legislation intended for community empowerment through land and property ownership. Since the opening of the devolved Scottish Parliament in 1999, land ownership and the rights of communities have emerged as priorities in legislation and funding opportunities. Considering this current climate, it can be assumed there will be more attempts by communities to reuse churches released by the Church of Scotland. The presentation of this research is thus a timely resource for understanding the experiences and motivations of those involved as well as recognising the rich variety of engagements between people and these places of enduring and evolving significance.

1.2. Research context

Attention to the contemporary reuse of churches has been largely design-oriented, concerned with best practices for converting spaces for new uses, or from the perspective of heritage bodies reporting on this phenomenon out of interest in the historic, architectural, artistic and other dimensions of significance frequently ascribed to this building type. There is also philosophical and anthropological interest in religious material culture and the experiences of former congregants when a church is given a new secular or religious use. While this body of existing research demonstrates the numerous approaches to understanding church reuse, notably absent are in-depth presentations of the perspectives and experiences of new owners, particularly in cases of non-religious use. This

section explores existing research on church reuse, as well as the intersection of interests at which this research topic sits.

The process of reusing a church building for a purpose other than that for which it was built is an example of *adaptive reuse*, broadly defined as ‘the common process within a given structure of exchanging one type of activity for another’ (Wong 2017: 148). While this term emerged in the 1970s amidst an increased awareness of finite natural resources, the practice of reuse itself is ancient (ibid.: 30). As Coomans describes, ‘there is a long tradition of change, selection and reuse of sacred places’ that may be studied as brought about by the religious, social, political, and economic circumstances of a given place and time (2012: 222). He presents how churches have historically become mosques, barracks, prisons, were used for textile manufacturing and converted to homes for nobility, amidst many examples of reuse (ibid.: 221-241).

My interest is in contemporary reuse and the current climate in which these projects are taking place. In studies of reuse today, much of the focus is on this practice as an architectural and design endeavour. Examples include case studies used to present arguments for design strategies employed at adapted churches, such as the conversion of the Toronto Centennial Japanese United Church into luxury loft housing (Lynch 2011), while others provide overview descriptions to index reuse types within a particular place, as Velthuis and Spennemann (2007) provide for the Netherlands and Simons, Ledebur and DeWine (2017) do for the United States, and other studies propose potential design interventions (Faro and Miceli 2019).

The priorities at the centre of studies on the reuse of churches can, of course, include overlapping considerations of heritage and social values of place, as Faro and Miceli describe when proposing the suitability of a capuchin convent in Italy for reuse as temporary housing affiliated with a nearby hospital (2019). In addition to serving a valuable new use, ‘the idea was to reconnect the history of the convent to its community, restoring, through a new use, a bond that was suddenly broken’ through a proposed design intervention (ibid: 10; see also Fiorani et al: 2017). Centring discussions on the processes and outcomes of adaptive reuse brings attention to the buildings as materially comprised and encountered, often at the level of individual case studies, and highlights how new uses manifest within the former church.

Issues of environmental sustainability are increasingly the focus of discussions on the adaptive reuse of churches and the practice more broadly, reflecting growing international attention to the climate crisis and meeting sustainability goals (Cerreta et al 2020: 1; see also: Conejos et al. 2012; Yung and Chan 2012). Bullen and Love describe the 'growing body of opinion [which] supports the view that adaptive reuse is a powerful strategy for handling this change' towards sustainability by utilising the embodied energy and materials in extant buildings, rather than creating waste through demolition and the production and transport of new materials (2011: 411; see also: Wong 2017; De Medici et al. 2019). Churches provide particularly unique opportunities for sustainable development in urban settings, where they are often already spatially and culturally embedded. Cerreta et al. (2020) explore the potential of adaptive reuse as a sustainable method of urban community improvement at the former Morticelli church in Salerno, Italy, which was used as a 'Living Lab' to trial uses for the existing site and record the resulting engagements by different segments of the population. A concern for the environmental impact of reuse demonstrates how a project may be understood not only according to its new function, but also as part of a broader movement.

Adapted churches are also found in discussions of secularisation and the nature of religious material culture in shifting contexts. The former may refer more simply to non-religion and the conversion to non-religious uses (Velthuis and Spennemann 2007), or to a theory on society's move away from religion and its influences that emerged in the 1960s and is currently evolving towards more flexible postsecular 'perspectives that acknowledge the endurance and diversity of religion in contemporary society' (Lynch and LeDrew 2020: 312). Secularisation is often pointed to as the largest contributing factor in membership decline across a number of denominations in Europe and the Anglosphere, and thus as a prominent cause of church redundancy (Velthuis and Spennemann 2007: 43; Clark 2007: 70). The question then is what becomes of the church building in non-religious contexts. Historian Jennifer Clark claims that 'church buildings and ecclesiastical material culture are set adrift in a secular world', the religious memories embodied in them silenced and forgotten, or 'relegated to the status of heritage' as the secular community 'appropriates the material culture of the church' (2007: 60; 77). What is missing from this argument presuming the consequences of non-religious use, however, are the perspectives and

experiences of the people actually involved and through whose efforts these places are recontextualised and adapted to new uses.

Such evidence can be obtained through ethnographic approaches to understanding reuse within the context of 'sacred to secular' transformations, which centre human experience and are particularly advantageous for revealing social processes and material engagements with place. One insight from such studies is the presence of sacred 'residues' that endure in new secular contexts and influence how the place is understood. One early use of the concept of 'residues of the sacred' emerges in Stephenson's study on the closure of Highgate Church in Ontario, Canada, where it is mentioned in passing and described as 'cemeteries or stories', which can presumably be taken as representative of material and social remnants of religious practices and memories of place (2015: 6). It emerged again shortly thereafter as a more robust analytical concept utilised by Beekers to represent an abstract 'sense that something remains' after the conversion to a new use (2016: 1). 'This sacred residue may take the form of a particular atmosphere that is felt to linger in the converted building, but it may also consist of objects or images that have been preserved and serve as remainders and reminders of the site's previous uses' (*ibid.*). These observations reveal reuse as an inherently incomplete and ongoing process, with remnants—both material and emotional—affecting the new use.

Beekers' work in the Netherlands also addresses the multi-layered and at times contested significance of religious material culture at former churches. In one example, he presents a conflict between the desire of parish officials to 'unchurch' a Catholic church building before its conversion to a dance studio by removing or modifying identifiable religious features, and the desire of new owners to retain a mosaic for its artistic significance and contribution to the uniqueness of the venue (2016: 3). Similarly, he describes the 'reappraisal of church buildings as cultural heritage' by nearby and often non-religious residents who then campaign for the preservation of buildings and their distinctly religious materiality, at times against the wishes of the religious institutions involved (2018). This phenomenon has been described as the 'heritagisation of religion', reframing religious material culture as the product of a shared heritage regardless of religious affiliation or lack thereof (Bowman and Sepp 2019).

Another interpretation describes this phenomenon as the ‘appropriation’ of religious material culture embodied in the church or objects left behind. Clark presents a winery tasting room in a former chapel in South Australia where stained glass and gothic arches feature heavily throughout the company’s branding while liturgical items decorate the room. ‘These features, it must be said, are not valued for their religious significance rather they have been absorbed into the current culture of the winery to capitalise on available atmosphere’ (1996: 154). Lynch and LeDrew describe such displays of ‘ecclesiastical paraphernalia’ as common in the adaptive reuse of churches (2020: 324). However, they argue for this to be viewed as representative of ‘the ongoing and complex negotiations between secular and sacred values’, allowing features and objects to remain a ‘visible part of the local story’ and testifying to its religious past rather than letting it be lost (ibid.). This emphasis on ongoing negotiations allows space for nuanced understandings of ongoing processes of understanding and representation.

Remaining focused on Lynch and LeDrew, their two case studies in Newfoundland, Canada—one a gastropub and B&B, the other a faith based social enterprise offering a blend of religious services and secular spaces for gatherings—point to the importance of looking beyond urban centres to include ‘farther flung communities’ in discourse on closure and reuse (2020: 311). As they describe, ‘little is known about the socio-cultural or material contexts and impacts of these adaptive reuses in place outside the mainstream’, indicating considerable gaps in research and knowledge (ibid.). This issue of imbalanced representation regarding the diverse circumstances of church reuse can be seen at the national level as well, with countries like the Netherlands, Canada, and Australia dominating discourse around the adaptive reuse of churches, as demonstrated throughout this section and in later discussions.

In Scotland, conversations on church reuse are primarily happening at the level of heritage bodies and stakeholder organisations. The most influential of these is Historic Environment Scotland (HES), the national public body tasked with ‘investigating, caring for and promoting Scotland’s historic environment’ through stewardship of its large portfolio of properties and collections, advising on the treatment and recognition of historic buildings,

sites, and designed landscapes, and carrying out other educational and advocacy roles.¹ Speaking to reuse more broadly, HES currently advises that ‘the best way to protect our buildings is usually to keep them in use – and if that isn’t possible, to find a new use that has the least possible effect on the things that make the building special’, encouraging the practice of adaptive reuse as a means of ‘managing change’ in the historic built environment (2019c: 4).

This position of adaptive reuse as a potential conservation method extends to at least 1981, when the Scottish Civic Trust (SCT) produced a reference manual aimed at local amenity societies and property developers on the subject of sustaining historic buildings in a rapidly changing world by adapting them to new uses (1981: 9). Of all the building categories described by the SCT in their guidance (e.g. educational buildings, tenements, country houses, etc.) churches are given the most attention by a wide margin. This may be because, as they claim, ‘redundant churches have attracted a wider range of new uses than any other type of historic building’, to the point that these buildings ‘fulfil almost every conceivable human need. From the ante-natal clinic to the funeral parlour’ (ibid.: 23).

It should be noted that discussions of church reuse and ecclesiastic heritage in Scotland often lack denominational distinctions. As the national church, the Church of Scotland represents approximately 70% of the country’s ecclesiastical buildings and is often treated as the default institution in discussions of churches and their use (Scottish Civic Trust 2010: 20). The dominance of the Church of Scotland both historically and in church redundancy and reuse is discussed more in Chapter Two. Returning to the manual by the SCT, it presents examples of adaptive reuse and proposes why particular features of the church suit these uses. One example is Newington and St Leonard’s Church in Edinburgh, which was converted to a concert hall. Use as auditoria suits many Post-Reformation Presbyterian buildings that ‘tend to be wide aisleless structures with a foyer, upper galleries on three sides and sometimes a shallow chancel’ (1981: 26).

Examples of reuse by communities are notably absent in this manual. After discussing the conversion of Great George Congregational Church in Liverpool to a dedicated community and arts centre, the SCT reports that ‘as yet, Scotland possesses no

¹ The work of Historic Environment Scotland as it relates to church buildings, including the two case studies presented here, is discussed at length in Chapter Two.

comparable conversion for community use' (1981: 26). Only a few years later, in 1986, the Southside Community Centre was opened in the former Nicolson Street Church in Edinburgh, and in 1998 St Francis Community Centre opened in the eponymous former church in Glasgow.² Both of these, however, are owned by their respective local authorities, though the Southside Community Centre is operated by a local community association and its purchase was the result of a long campaign by area residents. This seems to suggest that the trend of community ownership represented by my two case studies is relatively recent, which Chapter Three supports in its discussion of the ongoing movement for land reform in Scotland. A dedicated study of church reuse presented by the SCT in 2006 reflects increased attention to both community use and connections between these people and places, stating that 'the social and cultural importance of a church building's connection to past events cannot be underestimated. Many individuals hold deep feelings for a church building irrespective of personal belief' (2006: 6).

The quote above and its reference to a shared significance of ecclesiastic buildings regardless of religious affiliation represents a widespread and seemingly unquestioned 'heritagisation of religion' in Scotland, as defined earlier. In the *Report with recommendation on the long-term conservation of the ecclesiastical heritage in a time of demographic change*, the Historic Environment Advisory Council for Scotland (HEACS) also states that 'many people who are not active church-goers attach considerable value to Scotland's churches' (2009: 3). Scotland's ecclesiastic architecture is considered 'a significant component of the nation's built and cultural heritage', presenting it as a shared cultural and historical resource (ibid.). The SCT provide several reasons for this assessment. Firstly, many churches possess historic importance both in terms of human activity and their built fabric. They may represent specific architectural styles and possess details valued for their artistic quality, craftsmanship, or rarity. The building may also have a positive impact on the unique character and identity of their surroundings. Lastly, these places may possess enduring social value as community resources and anchors of local identity transcending individual beliefs (2006: 6). Reuse is advocated as a means of preserving some or all of these values when a building is under threat of being lost.

² This is not to say that these are the first or only examples of community reuse in this period, particularly considering that the activities of smaller communities outside major urban centres may not be present in available research.

As this section has demonstrated, existing research on the phenomenon of church reuse largely focuses on the nature of design interventions and their impact on the often historic fabric of these buildings, the consequences of this on religious material culture and memories left behind, and the perspectives of the religious communities witnessing the transformation of their former places of worship. The research context presented here reveals how a focus on the experiences of communities reusing churches in Scotland offers insights that are both topically and geographically distinct.

1.3. Research approach

This thesis aims to make visible the work and experiences of communities reusing former Church of Scotland churches by taking two case studies representing dissimilar community compositions, geographical locations, and building typologies. By critically considering the case studies of Bellfield in the Edinburgh suburb of Portobello and Clachan Church at the head of Loch Broom in the Highlands, I aim to gain insights into the diverse ways community groups understand, experience, and engage with former churches while generating new uses for them. To accomplish this, I examine how the community organisations of Clachan Lochbroom Heritage Trust at Clachan Church and Action Party at Bellfield constitute themselves in relation to these places and I explore the impact of evolving legislation intended for community empowerment through land reform on place and community identity both conceptually and in practice. This also requires an understanding of why these places are valued and how this is negotiated after communities take ownership. In particular, I explore how former churches under community ownership are understood and reconceptualised through embodied engagements, considering the ‘inherited’ nature of their buildings and the complex landscape of memory and significance made material in them.

1.4. Methodology

This research project utilised a qualitative research strategy guided largely by ethnographic practices and tailored to each case study in response to their unique circumstances and settings. These methods, such as participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and social media research, were informed by phenomenological approaches to exploring the embodied relationships between people and former churches now under community ownership. Before discussing the research strategies for each case study, I will address this overarching research design, beginning with the use of case studies.

To use a definition proposed by Simons, who specialises in the theory and practice of qualitative methodologies and writes extensively on developing case study research, the case study is a research design frame widely used across disciplines for investigating ‘a particular project, policy, institution, program or system in a ‘real life’ context. It is research-based, inclusive of different methods and is evidence-led’ (2009: 21). It can be defined and framed as ‘an instance of some phenomenon’; in this context, Bellfield and Clachan Church are distinct instances of the phenomenon of church reuse by communities in Scotland (Starman 2013: 35). The strengths of case study research stem from its methodological flexibility and the ability to study a phenomenon within its own dynamic context (Simons 2009: 23). As it is not bound to any particular methodology, it may utilise quantitative methods (such as counting frequencies, multiple choice surveys, and experimentation), qualitative methods like those used here, or a mix to suit the research topic (ibid: 5; see also: Starman 2013: 30).

As this research is concerned with subjective experiences of those involved with the two church reuse projects chosen as case studies, qualitative social research methods, and particularly ethnographic practices, were used. Clark et al. conclude that qualitative research can be summarised as largely inductive, in that theory is developed through research rather than being imposed upon it, and epistemologically interpretivist in nature. The latter ‘meaning that it tries to generate an understanding of the social world by examining how its participants interpret it’ (2021: 351). Social phenomena are held as emerging and evolving from the experiences and interactions of the people involved. Methods for approaching such topics often focus on the context of what is being studied, attempt to understand the perspectives and experiences of those involved through

participant observation, and conduct qualitative interviews that allow the interviewee room to influence the discussion in reflection of their unique point of view (ibid: 354, 426). I relied heavily on *ethnographic* methods in particular, which require further clarification.

Ethnographic research, as McGranahan describes, is ‘a much more all-encompassing and demanding way of knowing’ through ‘getting deeply into the rhythms, logics, and complications of life as lived by a people in a place, or perhaps by peoples in places’ (2014: 24). Through the practice of participant observation, the researcher is able to observe and engage with people in their own environment, documenting through the creation of ‘thick’ descriptions that capture the complexity of human life and experience (Geertz 1973) while ‘allowing a real historical agency to the people who figure in them’ (Ingold 2014: 385). Although it is critical to justify one’s use of the term ‘ethnographic research’, there is also undeniably an element of ordinary improvisation at the centre of such research (Cerwonka and Malkki 2007), by which I mean that terms like ‘semi-structured interviews’ and ‘participant-observation’ risk being used as somewhat sterile methodological labels for practices that in fact amount to immersing oneself in a particular research context—getting to know people, spending time with them, building rapport and even friendships, all of which allows ethnographers to examine and analyse a phenomenon in ways that are not reducible to a neat and coherent assemblage of discrete methods.

However, the ‘real historical agency’ that social researchers encounter in the field is always mediated by the researcher’s own positionality (Ingold 2014: 385). As the sole author of this thesis, expressions of ‘rhythms,’ ‘logics,’ and ‘agency’ have been selectively curated, described, and analysed by myself. One of the principal strengths of ethnography—its capacity to grant researchers granular, comprehensive, and highly textured insights into the lives of others—is also one of its potential weaknesses, as these insights are always perspectival, dependent on the researcher and their background. This raises the importance of reflexivity in qualitative research, that being reflecting ‘back onto oneself to recognize and take responsibility for one’s own situatedness within the research and the effect that it may have on the setting and people being studied, questions being asked, data being collected and its interpretation’ (Berger 2015: 220). A researcher’s unique position—encompassing a wide range of traits, experiences, and ideologies, from gender identity, age, and immigration status to religious beliefs, personal and professional histories—can impact access to informants and sites, influence the nature of relationships with people in the field

and the information they share, and inform research design, such as the language and direction of interview questions and how responses are analysed and presented (Berger 2015: 220). Consequently, the influence of my own positionality will be raised throughout the following discussion of my methodology.

To speak on this research more broadly, this thesis grew from my existing interest in dynamics between communities and the historic built environment, as first explored in my 2016 master's dissertation in Architectural Conservation on the reuse of historical homes as local history museums in communities across Scotland. Though the focus of that research was primarily on ownership and material circumstances surrounding reuse, I was exposed to the everyday lived realities of people engaged in these projects. This interest in the experiences of people, and particularly those at the local level, was furthered in everyday practice during two years as a volunteer at the national office of the Architectural Heritage Society of Scotland, where I communicated with regional groups engaged in education and advocacy in their communities. These experiences interacting with people and witnessing their unique relationships with places inspired the desire to design an ethnographically centred project, while the workshop recalled at the start of this thesis inspired the topic of church reuse, bringing together my interests in the historic built environment and the people who engage with it.

While the background described above created a foundation of knowledge and experience regarding built heritage practice, policy, and public engagement, my immigration status as an American residing in Edinburgh for four years prior to undertaking fieldwork uniquely positioned me as familiar yet adjacent to the experiences of my informants. Many were lifelong residents in their particular areas while some had moved from elsewhere within the UK. I encountered very few immigrants, and those I did had moved to Scotland many years earlier. It is also worth noting that my background in the Lutheran Church and current position as non-religious equipped me with a unique attunement towards the complexity of both religious and non-religious encounters with churches as witnessed throughout my fieldwork. However, this background also meant that I entered this project with little knowledge of the Church of Scotland.

The degree of distance between myself and the topic under study is significant as familiarity may generate benefits in the form of easier access to informants and sites as well as possessing existing, nuanced knowledge of the topic, people, or context (Berger 2015:

223). However, familiarity also brings 'risks of blurring boundaries; imposing own values, beliefs, and perceptions by a researcher; and projection of biases' (ibid: 224). Such risks were tempered by my initial unfamiliarity with Portobello and Lochbroom, their histories and community dynamics, and an ongoing awareness of my status as an incomer that placed my informants in an empowered 'expert position' (ibid: 227). A degree of unfamiliarity may also be beneficial as it brings new perspectives to a topic or experience, potentially leading to novel approaches, questions, and insights. One example of this is the discussion on the nature of each community presented in Chapter Three, where someone already embedded in such a complex fabric may not question its development and form.

When describing this research as attuned to embodied experiences, I refer to a practice Cargonja describes as 'paying closer attention to bodiliness in the lifeworlds of the people we study when they engage with their environment, with other people, or when they just talk to us' (2013: 46). This interest in subjective experiences, embodied states, and relations with the materiality of place, explores 'the lived human experience in all its richness' and can be described as taking a phenomenological perspective (ibid.: 20). Of course, as a philosophical discipline, phenomenology emerged in the work of Husserl (1913) and was further articulated by successors Heidegger (1927) and Merleau-Ponty (1945), who emphasised 'the situatedness of human experience in the world' (Cargonja 2013: 23). Today, phenomenology recurs as a concept and thematic area in a wide range of disciplines, including architectural theory, where 'the body's corporeality is regarded in a phenomenological manner, aiming to develop an awareness of the experience and construction of knowledge that arises from it' in architectural spaces (Voigt and Roy 2021: 143). This emphasis influences the way buildings are conceptualised, as Pallasmaa explains.

A building is encountered; it is approached, confronted, related to one's body, moved through, utilised as a condition for other things. Architecture initiates, directs and organises behaviour and movement. A building is not an end in itself; it frames, articulates, structures, gives significance, relates, separates and unites, facilitates and prohibits (2012: 68).

This perspective of buildings as sites of complex interactions and meanings inspired the development of research strategies for each case study as I focused on understanding former churches as continually encountered and conceptualised through embodied engagements by their new community owners. With this general research design

established, I now present its scope and finally the detailed research strategies employed for each case study.

1.4.1. Research scope

This research is limited to former Church of Scotland churches, though other denominations are mentioned where relevant to the discussion at hand. This focus is in response to the overwhelming prevalence of Church of Scotland buildings within the phenomenon of church reuse in Scotland (Scottish Civic Trust 2006: 5). The scope of this research is also limited to instances of ‘community reuse’, with *reuse* taken to mean legal ownership rather than hiring from the Church of Scotland or another entity, such as the City of Edinburgh Council. For the *community* dimension I accept the self-identification of groups as community initiatives rather than imposing my own definition, allowing the concept to emerge throughout my analysis. The two examples presented here were chosen for their dissimilar circumstances in location, community composition, building typology, and usage histories, thus offering insights into the diversity of experiences within the phenomenon of church reuse by communities in Scotland. These details are introduced in the following discussions on the research strategies implemented for each case study.

1.4.2. Case Study 1: Bellfield



Figure 2. The main entrance of Bellfield on 11 November 2018
(Photo by author)

My year of ethnographic fieldwork at Bellfield began in October 2018, less than six months after the former Portobello Old Parish Church in the Edinburgh suburb of Portobello was re-opened as the community hub pictured above. The church served the surrounding community for over 200 years, until its shrinking congregation was merged with two others and the Church of Scotland decided to close this surplus building in 2014. An upswell of local interest in retaining this place for community use resulted in the creation of Action Party, a registered charity that purchased the site for approximately £600,000 and reopened it as Bellfield in 2018. It sits on a short residential street directly between Portobello high street and the popular seaside promenade. In addition to the large former sanctuary, there are two versatile halls, a kitchen and secondary kitchenette, stage, several general purpose rooms, and multiple toilet facilities. Floorplans are provided in Chapter Four, where the history of Bellfield is discussed in greater detail. The walled-in grounds provide green spaces

for outdoor gatherings and performances, though some headstones remain. Its location was readily accessible by bus from my base in Edinburgh, making regular engagements convenient and relatively affordable.

Bellfield is managed by a single employee and a cohort of local volunteers—who assist with tasks from billing to gardening, building maintenance, and providing refreshments for events—and is overseen by a volunteer board of trustees. Though I did not collect demographic statistics on those involved, from my experiences I gathered that the majority were of working age with varied professional commitments in addition to their voluntary work with Action Party at Bellfield. Many also had children, some of whom contributed their own efforts to Bellfield through activities like gardening and painting. There were also retired individuals amongst the board and volunteers. This resulted in a variety of professional backgrounds and skillsets, the impact of which I discuss further in Chapter Three. I encountered a mix of people who were born and raised in Portobello, those who had moved to the area several decades earlier, and a few newer residents. Religious backgrounds were somewhat varied, though most described themselves as non-religious, in line with an overall decline in religious participation in Scotland today (Brierley 2017). A few described affiliations with the Church of Scotland, the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), or the Catholic Church.

I spent the year engaging in participant observation at this new community hub, primarily through work in the administrative office and involvement in the diverse day-to-day tasks involved in operating Bellfield. My ability to participate in this way was aided by previous work experience as an administrative assistant in an office setting and the resulting familiarity with related technology and practices. This involvement provided in-depth access to the myriad ways in which Bellfield is experienced and conceptualised, creating ‘ethnographic intimacy as embodied and experiential knowledge’ (McGranahan 2014: 33). ‘To practice participant observation,’ as Ingold describes, ‘is to join in correspondence with those with whom we learn or among whom we study’ (2014: 390). Activities included administrative tasks and correspondence with potential users and the surrounding neighbourhood, responding to the needs of current users (such as moving furniture and distributing keys), and attending board meetings and other events at Bellfield. Events were particularly beneficial as they brought in wider stakeholder audiences with whom I was able to interact and provided additional contexts in which to observe the building and my

informants.³ Through participant observation I was able to produce detailed fieldnotes documenting and reflecting on the year as it developed within Bellfield and Action Party's unique circumstances, thus engaging in the 'interpretive exercise' of creating what Ryle (1968) and more famously Geertz (1973) termed 'thick descriptions' of this case study (Spencer 2001: 445). This writing was enriched by the collection of photos, documents, and ephemera.

The embeddedness within day-to-day life at Bellfield described above allowed for ethnographic interviews with the leadership and volunteers of Action Party, a method Fielding describes as distinct from other interview styles due to 'the centrality of rapport based on relatively long-term contact, the investment of time in each round of interviewing and the kind of openness on the researcher's part that stimulates an evenhanded relationship' (2006: 100; see also: Heyl 2001). I conducted eight such interviews with trustees and volunteers, each of which lasted approximately one hour. My questions largely focused on their evolving relationships with the former church, the buy-out process, and how they experienced and understood this place. I also wanted to understand their motivations for becoming involved and their visions for the future. Five additional one hour long semi-structured interviews were conducted with Bellfield stakeholders whom I did not have such an established rapport, including area residents who hire spaces, former members of the parish church, and the head of the local heritage society. As I was less familiar with their backgrounds and interests, in these interviews I began with a broader approach that enquired as to their experiences and opinions of the community buy-out and the new use as a community hub.

The qualitative, open-ended nature of these interviews allowed my informants to speak in their own terms and created room for the conversation to flow according to their own thought processes and priorities, itself useful for understanding their perceptions of the topics being discussed (Weiss 1995). Interviews were recorded with interviewee consent, transcribed, and contextualised with narrative descriptions. These arranged interviews were in addition to impromptu discussions facilitated by my embeddedness

³ Events at Bellfield included those organised by Action Party, such as a volunteer appreciation social, Armistice Day memorial, and Annual General Meeting, and others that were arranged by a variety of organisations, including a presentation by the local heritage society, Edinburgh Festival Fringe jazz orchestra performance, and a Community Land Week celebration by Community Land Scotland.

throughout the year, which were recounted to the best of my ability within the detailed fieldnotes discussed previously.

The majority of interviews were conducted within Bellfield itself, because, as Evans and Jones note in their study of walking interviews, 'it seems intuitively sensible for researchers to ask interviewees to talk about the places that they are interested in while they are in that place' (2011: 849). Proximity did appear to positively influence the generation of rich details and engagement with the interview process, as my informants regularly paused to look around while considering their responses and gestured at features as they spoke (ibid.:856). They were also inspired by things around us, such as the sight of children entering the courtyard sparking memories of their own children, and a darkened lightbulb nearby reminding them of building maintenance work that needed to be done and their thankfulness for the volunteers who regularly carry out such tasks.

Finally, fieldwork at Bellfield was supplemented by documentary and archival research. This included obtaining documents produced during the community buy-out campaign, a feasibility study, funding applications, and other materials made available to me in the administrative office. Archival research was conducted at the National Records of Scotland, Historic Environment Scotland, and the National Library of Scotland to confirm the historical development of the site and its surrounding context. Items of interest included historical maps of Portobello, church records and publications, and architectural drawings. These findings were conveyed to Action Party for their own reference, as such historical research had not been conducted prior to my involvement.

1.4.3. Case Study 2: Clachan Church



Figure 3. Clachan Church in the spring of 2019 (Photo by Clachan Lochbroom Heritage Trust)

Developing a case study around Clachan Church required a more flexible research strategy than that presented above for Bellfield. Located at the head of Loch Broom on the northwest coast of Ross and Cromarty in the Highlands, Clachan Church served its rural surroundings from its construction in 1817 until its closure in 2016, when it was purchased by the community through Clachan Lochbroom Heritage Trust, a charitable organisation created in response to the threat of closure and sale. At the time of my fieldwork in 2018, the church was open on occasion but not in regular use. The building consists of a two-storey sanctuary (though the upper gallery level was closed off in the 1950s) and a vestry. A floorplan and photos are provided in Chapter Five, when this case study is presented in greater detail. There is electricity but no further amenities. It is now managed by a volunteer board of trustees with no paid members of staff.

As with Bellfield, I did not collect statistical data on demographics in this case study, however, through my engagements I was able to gather details about those involved. Most of the trustees at Clachan Church were older than those at Bellfield, being at or near retirement age, and the membership was a mix of older and working aged individuals.

One trustee was a member of the former Church of Scotland congregation, which had dwindled to only ten at the time of the church's closure, while several other trustees and members I met described themselves as non-religious. The people involved with Clachan Church presented a variety of professional backgrounds, a topic I address further in Chapter Three. Some were lifelong area residents, others had relocated from elsewhere in the UK over the past few decades, and at least one had immigrated to the UK and now lived near the church. While membership is open to residents of the expansive historic Parish of Lochbroom once served by the former church, the organisation's leadership at the time of my research was located in a string of small communities closest to the church, a fact I explore in greater detail in Chapter Five.

Clachan's location—far from my base in Edinburgh and in a rural setting not easily served by public transportation—coupled with irregular openings in which to experience the building for myself and observe others, guided the development of my research strategy for this case study. Four periods of in-person fieldwork were timed to coincide with the first Annual General Meeting in September 2018, an important gathering of the membership to discuss their experiences thus far and plans for the future, and the availability of the board for interviews and other engagements. These research trips of approximately one week each were immersive opportunities for generating ethnographic accounts of the community to supplement my direct work with the Trust.

On several occasions, conversations with local residents evolved into unstructured interviews about their thoughts on the church and the community buy-out. Two of these were recorded and transcribed while three others were recounted to the best of my ability in fieldnotes. With a small population in the area surrounding the church, it appeared that most people were familiar with the community buy-out and thus had some opinion or memory they wanted to share when they learned of my interest. As a result of this more fully immersive strategy, fieldwork here occurred in shorter, more intensive bursts than my regular, scheduled attendance at Bellfield. This fieldwork is also notable as I was twice invited into the homes of local women to sit, share a meal, and discuss their thoughts on the building—a degree of intimate access potentially afforded to me as a woman.

My work with the Trust involved 'going along' with members of the board, since the building was not regularly open or occupied and could not serve as a base for my fieldwork. This method, described by Kusenbach as a combination of interview and participant

observation, enabled me to actively explore their 'stream of experiences and practices' through questions and observations while accompanying them in their own environment (2003: 463). Activities included traveling by car to and from Clachan, walking around the building and grounds, and visiting the nearby village and hamlets. This method is particularly beneficial 'because informants will spontaneously and continuously comment on their personal connections to places and people in the environment', as one woman did when she described the residents of each house as we drove past, including their connections to Clachan (ibid: 475). These encounters and conversations resulted in detailed fieldnotes, photographs, and, when possible, recordings of conversations that were then transcribed and annotated to generate rich narrative depictions.

In addition to the unstructured interviewing that occurred while 'going along', I also conducted a two hour long semi-structured group interview with five members of the board. I primarily asked about their relationships with the church before and after its closure, the community buy-out, and their experiences of community ownership thus far, including thoughts on the purpose and future of this endeavour. While this did not take place at Clachan, it was at a well-known local gathering place, making it a comfortable and accessible setting for these informants. In this semi-structured interview strategy, 'respondents are encouraged to expand on a response, or digress, or even go off the particular topic and introduce their own concerns', and with multiple speakers present they built upon each other's responses to develop richer, more nuanced descriptions representing multiple perspectives (Davies 2008: 106). Such group discussions, of course, bear the qualification that responses may be influenced by power dynamics amongst the interviewees and pressure to conform answers to certain expectations (Clark et al. 2021: 473). As with other interviews, this was recorded with consent, transcribed, and formed into an extensive ethnographic account.

Social media played a role in the buy-out campaign and continues to serve as an important tool of international community building at Clachan, making this realm an expansion of my observational field. The public 'Friends of Clachan Lochbroom' Facebook account run by the Trust was a rich source of news, correspondence, and commentary that I approached as 'documentary research' due to its public nature and my lack of participation (Clark et al. 2021: 512). However, any names included in such references have been omitted

or given pseudonyms in line with ethical practices of anonymisation used throughout the thesis.

Just as with Bellfield, archival research at the National Records of Scotland, Historic Environment Scotland, and the National Library of Scotland was conducted to confirm the historical development of the site and its surroundings. Items of interest included historical maps of Lochbroom Parish, church records and publications, and architectural drawings. Research output by the nearby Ullapool Museum, and particularly their 'Lost Inverlael: Finding Balblair' archaeological and archival project marking the 200th anniversary of a forced depopulation event known as the Inverlael Clearances, was also beneficial in developing historical and contemporary understandings of the region.

1.4.4. Limitations and access

I acknowledge that there are potential limitations to this research design. The first is that by considering only two case studies, this thesis cannot be said to comprehensively represent community reuse of Church of Scotland churches, as circumstances can still vary widely between projects and points in time. However, the aims of this research are to explore this phenomenon within a particular period, not to represent it in its entirety. The use of focused case studies allowed for the production of richer ethnographic accounts from which to draw my analyses, though this also introduced limitations in the form of my own inherent biases and background, as I pointed out above with respect to the researcher's positionality. This is unavoidable, as Davies observes, because 'all researchers are to some degree connected to, or part of, the object of their research' (2008: 3). This necessitated an ongoing awareness of my circumstances and their impact on this research as it was gathered, analysed, and presented to honestly represent the realities of my informants and their environs to the best of my ability.

One of the earliest obstacles I had to overcome was gaining access to the organisations of Action Party and Clachan Lochbroom Heritage Trust. This was a particularly important step in the case of Bellfield, where I was considerably more embedded in its operations, about which the organisation's leadership expressed an initial wariness at having an outside observer in their midst. My initial meeting with trustees from both organisations occurred at the workshop on church reuse described at the start of this thesis,

which signalled my interest in the subject and positively framed the introduction to my research in a congenial environment of education and dialogue. This encounter may have favourably influenced my ability to obtain access when I approached these same trustees several months later about participating in this research.

Utilising strategies outlined by Shenton and Heyter, I was able to successfully engage with 'gatekeepers'—in both cases the board of trustees—to obtain access to my case study sites and the individuals who would become my informants. This began with showing 'endorsements from "authorities"' to establish the legitimacy of this research project, which came in the form of my affiliation with the University of Edinburgh (2004: 223). The remaining steps varied between case studies, which I now address separately. At Bellfield, 'responding to gatekeepers' concerns honestly' enabled me to dispel concerns that I would be reporting on the inner workings of the organisation itself (i.e. finances and social dynamics) rather than their relationships with the building, which was a source of some initial uncertainty amongst the board of trustees (Shenton and Heyter 2004: 223). Such 'openness' around intentions and methods had the unexpected benefit of inspiring recommendations of additional people I might interview and invitations to events my informants felt might be beneficial to my research (ibid.: 226). This coincided with another recommended strategy, which is 'remaining receptive to advice from gatekeepers on how the fieldwork should proceed' (ibid.: 230).

Perhaps most effective for obtaining access to Bellfield was a combination of 'striking bargains enabling both parties to benefit from the project' and making my presence unobtrusive with no 'onerous demands' placed on my informants (Shenton and Heyter 2004: 230). These strategies aligned with the participatory nature of my fieldwork at Bellfield, where I actively contributed to the everyday running of the place through administrative tasks in the office, distributing correspondence to neighbouring residents, creating new standardised signage for rooms, moving furniture to prepare for events, greeting visitors, and even developing an informational flyer of the building's history. This offered extensive, unobtrusive access for myself and beneficial activity for Bellfield.

Obtaining access to Clachan Church and its new community owners was considerably more straightforward. After a chance meeting with three members of the board of trustees at an event on the topic of keeping former churches in use, they invited me directly to visit the church and take it up as a subject of study. Even though I did not have to convince the

board of trustees to grant me access, I still acted with a spirit of ‘openness’ and ‘reciprocity’ to ‘demonstrate good intentions’ and establish a positive rapport (Shenton and Heyter 2004: 225-6). This was through transparency regarding my research objectives and methods and sharing publications I had gathered on church reuse and other successful projects when asked if I could provide any potentially beneficial information.

1.5. Thesis structure

This thesis is structured as six chapters, beginning with the above introduction to the project, its methods, and research context. Chapter Two focuses on the Church of Scotland and its extensive built legacy to understand the ongoing surfeit of churches and their sale to community groups such as Action Party and Clachan Lochbroom Heritage Trust. In addition to tracing historical developments explaining the construction and accumulation of these buildings, this discussion addresses official perspectives and their theological origins as well as everyday experiences involved in the closure and sale of churches. I then describe the phenomenon of reusing church buildings in Scotland, including why the majority come from the national church and the nature of heritage designations that may influence this process. The chapter ends by placing this Scottish experience in a wider international context that locates my case studies in current trends of church reuse.

Chapter Three establishes the two case studies presented in this thesis as emerging from ongoing social and legislative shifts in support of community ownership of property in Scotland, which are part of a larger movement to reform centuries old inequalities in landownership. The chapter begins with the origins of this movement in the work of notable early organisers for community empowerment through ownership and proceeds into the new era of land reform legislation following the opening of the devolved Scottish Parliament in 1999, paying particular attention to developments directly impacting my case studies, such as the legal mechanism of Community Right to Buy. Attention is given to tensions that may arise between imposed structures and practices surrounding the creation of community bodies as legal entities and the dynamic, lived realities of communities as expressed by those involved with such groups. Having described the creation of community bodies such as Action Party and Clachan Lochbroom Heritage Trust, the chapter then turns to the important subject of funding for these community buy-outs, as developments here

also reflect attempts to encourage local level initiatives. The Scottish approach to land reform discussed throughout this chapter is then put in an international context.

Chapter Four presents the case study of Bellfield, a community hub in the Edinburgh suburb of Portobello owned by Action Porty. The chapter begins with an exploration of its origins as Portobello Old Parish Church, evolving to meet the needs of a growing seaside community for over 200 years until its closure in 2014. A description of the community buy-out and subsequent reopening as Bellfield introduces the ethnographic context in which my fieldwork took place and contextualises the following insights. The overarching observation at Bellfield is how identity is mediated through materiality as Action Porty navigate and engage with this inherited place, generating its identity as Bellfield through embodied engagements. I begin this discussion by demonstrating how the former church and its halls is a place of memory and social connectedness that is understood and reconceptualised by its new owners. The next section considers the importance of embodied engagement in generating and strengthening both place and community identity. Using the concept of 'emplacement', I demonstrate how these identities are deliberately performed by Action Porty in the creation of Bellfield as a dynamic and inclusive community hub. Finally, I turn to how this community group navigates the inherited or 'secondhand' nature of the former church. In doing so, I reveal tensions between evolving regimes of value that guide their actions and point to what I describe as a 'confounding materiality' that defies attempts at emplacement. This discussion concludes with examples demonstrating the navigation of identity and value through specific engagements, balancing the inherited nature of a local place of significance with efforts to create a community hub.

Chapter Five presents the case study of Clachan Church and its new community owners, Clachan Lochbroom Heritage Trust. The historical development presented at the start of this chapter is particularly important as Clachan's location at the head of Loch Broom has been a site of religious or spiritual significance since the early 12th century, long before the current 19th century church was constructed, and the influence of this continuity repeatedly emerges throughout the chapter. The chapter continues through the closure of the church in 2016, the campaign for community ownership, and the Trust's reopening of the building in 2018. What emerged from my time at Clachan and engaging with its community was a sense of resilience through continuity of embodied engagement with this place of significance. I begin my analysis with an assessment of Clachan's unique global

community and the role of its historic built fabric in bringing local residents and the Scots Diaspora together through different experiences of place. This is followed by a discussion on the powerful influence of the surrounding landscape as both a physical domain and mnemonic device, holding memories of the deep past and anchoring a sense of continuity at the site, which Clachan has come to embody as a feature of the landscape. This leads to a discussion on Clachan's entanglement in regional narratives of loss and displacement, and why the threat of deliberate ruination by the Church of Scotland evoked a strong response from the local community. I argue that the sense of absence arising from such narratives is managed through embodied readings of place, while community ownership acts to prevent what I termed 'the silencing of place' when Clachan was threatened with ruination. The chapter concludes with how the grassroots organising and everyday heritage work of the Trust is saving Clachan while also building a resilient community.

Chapter Six considers both case studies together to develop emergent themes I argue are significant for understanding community reuse of churches sold by the Church of Scotland, providing timely insights as the Church practices described in Chapter Two and the current legislative and social climate described in Chapter Three create an environment where such reuse may become increasingly common. The overarching theme of *living places* reveals how Bellfield and Clachan Church can be conceptualised as 'brought alight and alive' through the unique nature of community engagements with each place. Within this are themes of continuity and change, as well as the significance of notions of home that both guide and emerge from the work of these organisations. Reflecting on the project, the chapter presents recommendations on how elements of this project, its methods, observations, and insights, can be developed further or prove beneficial for future research.

Chapter 2. The Church of Scotland: A built legacy

Reused former churches are a common sight across Scotland, from Kilmorack Gallery in Beaulieu pictured below, to St Bride’s Centre in Edinburgh, the local museum in Ullapool, Soul cocktail bar in Aberdeen, and many other diverse new secular and religious uses. The vast majority of these buildings belonged to the Church of Scotland, a Protestant denomination with a strong history of church construction and accumulation through centuries of ideological fragmentation and reunification, as well as a theological perspective that emphasises the temporal, rather than sacred, nature of its places of worship.⁴ This chapter establishes the history of the Church of Scotland, the reasons behind its surfeit of churches, and the reuse of these buildings—particularly with regards to use by communities—to more fully understand the context from which my case study sites have evolved. It concludes by setting these within a broader international context of closure and reuse, revealing areas of potential insight through comparative studies or collaboration.



Figure 4. Kilmorack Gallery in March 2022. This contemporary art gallery was established in a former parish church in 1997 (Image by Google Maps)

⁴ The Church of Scotland is also referred to as: the Kirk, national Church, and abbreviated as CofS.

2.1. History of the Kirk

In a 2019 presentation to the General Assembly, the annual meeting of the Church of Scotland's highest governing body, one official described how 'over the years my predecessors have talked about the fact that this Church has far more buildings than it needs. And each Assembly has nodded in agreement that we must reduce the size of the estate' (Young 2019). At the time, the Kirk was two years into efforts to downsize 40% by 2027, or the equivalent of 50 churches sold per annum (Young 2018). The subject of surplus churches has long been part of the Church of Scotland's identity, due to its unique development over nearly 500 years of expansion, upheaval, and reunion. The following section provides an overview of this dynamic history to explain why and how Scotland's national Church came to own so many buildings, followed by an exploration of the current trend of decline and church closure.

Whilst evidence of Christianity in Scotland dates to the 5th century, the Church of Scotland emerged from the Scottish Reformation of 1560 as the Reformed national Church (Graham 2013). The medieval Church in Scotland had been Roman Catholic, and like others across Europe was caught in tumultuous 16th century movements for religious and political reform.⁵ Influenced by this international movement—particularly the ideology of John Calvin, whose 1536 *Institutes of the Christian Religion* provided a theological guide for Reformed churches—and the work of domestic reformers like John Knox, the Scottish Parliament (in this instance referred to as the Reformation Parliament) passed legislation in 1560 to re-develop the national faith (Brown 2001: 29).

After the Scottish Reformation, the structure of this Reformed Church was not settled until 1690 and the establishment of a Presbyterian government, meaning it would be governed by elected elders and structured around tiered courts, with no one head of the faith (Mutch 2014).⁶ The highest governing body of the Kirk is the General Assembly, which meets annually in Edinburgh. The General Assembly consists of 'around 400 ministers, 400

⁵ The origins, events, and outcomes of the Protestant Reformation in Scotland and elsewhere are too complex and tangential to be described here. For more details, see: Ryrie 2006; van den Brink and Hopfl 2014; Dawson 2015; Hazlett 2021.

⁶ The 17th century encompassed here was one of considerable conflict over the nature of the Church and the structure of its worship. For more on this period, see: Raffe 2012; Muirhead 2021; Walters 2022.

elders, and members of the diaconate, all representing the presbyteries.⁷ Below this are the presbyteries, district level courts consisting of area ministers, elders, and members of the diaconate (Church of Scotland 2023c). At the local level are individual kirk sessions for each congregation, comprised of church elders and ministers.

The Kirk has held the status of Scotland's national Church since 1690. After the Reformation, 'the Kirk proclaimed itself the national church for all Scots, working in conjunction with the civil authorities' to establish its pervasive social, political, and administrative influence throughout Scottish society (Dawson 2007: 234; see also: Mutch 2014: 241). This presence is evident in the ubiquity of its churches in communities across the country, representing the comprehensive coverage of the parish system. Historians note the extensive administrative practices of the Kirk, making these local churches important repositories for record keeping in addition to their status as local landmarks and gathering places (Mutch 2014: 241). Parish churches long served 'ecclesiastical as well as civil functions'; their ecclesiastical boundaries corresponded with civil ones, and they even served as local government units until 1975 (National Library of Scotland 2022).

Over the centuries, evolving ideologies led to schisms and eventually reunifications, prompting massive church building schemes to house these splintered congregations. An overview of the most significant developments will suffice to illustrate this dynamic history, and a timeline visually representing the development of the Kirk and its breakaway churches is provided at the end of this section.⁸ Possibly the most significant split occurred in 1843, when 450 ministers left to form the Free Church of Scotland in a dramatic event called the Disruption. Their concerns were primarily over the perceived spiritual integrity of the Church in the face of outside interference—namely the right of patronage, whereby a minister could be assigned by landowners or other wealthy church patrons (See: Rodger 2013; McKay 2012). The Free Church then merged with the United Presbyterian Church—itsself composed of former CofS congregations—in 1900 to form the United Free Church, though a conservative minority of the Free Church primarily located in the Highlands and Islands remained independent and today has more than 100 congregations (Free Church of

⁷ The diaconate is 'a form of ordained ministry, usually working in a complementary role in a ministry team in both parish and industry sector contexts' (Church of Scotland 2023c).

⁸ For more on the evolution of the Kirk, see: Brown 2001; Ryrie 2006; Macdonald 2017; Fergusson and Elliott 2019.

Scotland 2022). The majority of the United Free Church and its assets then merged into the Church of Scotland in 1929.

This dynamic history is still informing the sensibilities and self-understandings of the Kirk today. In a 2019 lecture on church buildings and emotional connections with them, the Rt Rev Colin Sinclair explained: 'I know we have too many buildings (often because as Presbyterians we split and then set up duplicate and competitive churches).' Such historical self-consciousness extends beyond this sense of identity to influence daily activities and relationships with places and other congregations. This can be seen in how, despite the last major reunion occurring nearly 100 years ago, some congregations are still influenced by the contentious circumstances in which their buildings were originally constructed. This emerged while meeting with the minister of a parish church originally built by the United Free Church and part of the Church of Scotland since 1929. He explained the aloof relationship between his church and their closest neighbouring congregation.

[The large church three blocks away] was kind of the mother church in the sense that it was built before the Disruption, so they see themselves as historically more important. Whereas all the breakaway ones... we shouldn't have been built. A 'if the Disruption had not happened, we would not be here' kind of thing. There has never been any activity between these two churches. All church associations with other congregations reach out in different directions. They never... We never ever... And yet you can see them. We're literally looking at each other.

By the end he was laughing and shaking his head, as if in disbelief at the situation both locations had inherited yet never attempted to reconcile. The consequences of the Kirk's long and complex history endure in its extensive built legacy and relationships people have with these places.

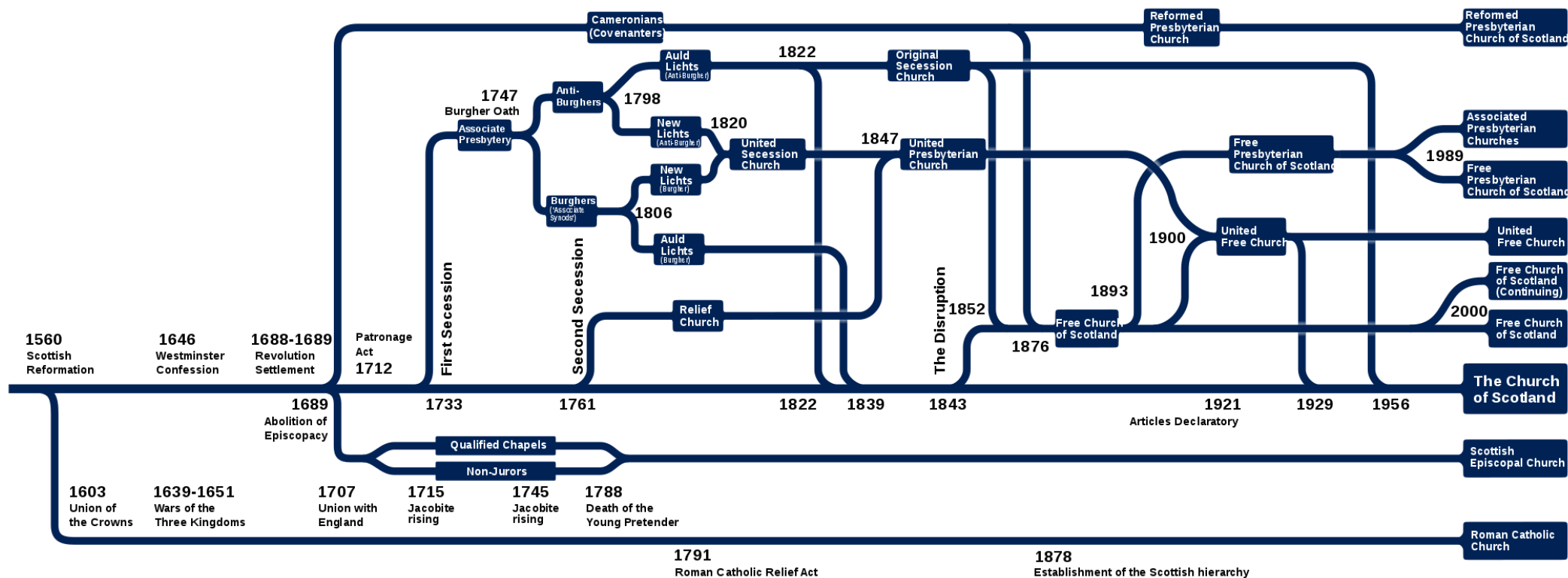


Figure 5. Diagram presenting the development of the Church of Scotland and its breakaway denominations from the Scottish Reformation in 1560 to the start of the 21st century (Public domain image)

2.2. Decline and closure

The reality is, as many would point out, the roof is leaking and the rain has been coming in for some time in the life of the Church of Scotland.

– The Church of Scotland, 2019b

After the reunion of the United Free Church with the Church of Scotland in 1929, the Kirk enjoyed several decades of membership growth before beginning to decline. The modern collapse of church attendance in Scotland can be traced to the social and ideological disruptions following World War II (Bruce & Glendinning 2010; Roxburgh 2022), though the pace did not begin to accelerate until the 1960s (Brown 2003). In 1947, Church of Scotland membership was at 1,246,167 and by 1984 it had contracted to 907,920 (Smith 1993). At this point, the decline was declared ‘catastrophic’ by one commenter in a church-run magazine (McOwan 1990: 4). This downward trend—seen across all denominations in Scotland, other than Pentecostals—has accelerated to the point where, in 2016, a national church census found that only 7.2% of Scots reported regularly attending services at any church (Brierley 2017: 4). As of 2021, membership with the Church of Scotland stands at approximately 300,000 and there are 650 ministers (Church of Scotland 2023a). Notably, a majority of members are over the age of 65, with the implication being that new generations are not being brought up in the Church to replenish its ranks (Brierley 2017: 5).

Proposed causes for this decline in membership range from an increase in higher education and wages (Smith 1993), to shifting demographics due to immigration and movement trends, declining birth rates, retiring ministers, and the general secularising of society at large (Brown 2003; Bruce & Glendinning 2010; Bruce 2014; Brierley 2017; Murray 2018). In my discussions with both laity and ministers, they told similar stories of decline due to a combination of these factors. During one interview, a woman who had attended the same church for 60 years until it was decommissioned and sold a few years earlier recounted her experiences as part of a waning congregation.

My church, which was on the next street and is a wee little house now, was built in 1836. But over the last few decades our membership fluctuated. Eventually, we couldn't afford a full or even part time minister. By the end there were only seven of us left, including myself, and only one man. And we're all getting a bit out there in age. There was no one left who could change a light bulb on the high ceiling. We had a beautiful building, but it wasn't built in an age of health and safety standards. So the inevitable happened. We had been discussing it for 10-15 years and [two other area congregations] had probably discussed it for the same amount of time. One minister retired, then another. It was in the cards for a long time, and it took 10 years before we all kind of finally took the plunge and started discussing joining our three churches into one.

Importantly, she discusses the consolidation of her congregation with two others also experiencing symptoms of decline, as well as how being unable to maintain the 'beautiful building' was a contributing factor in its closure and sale.

Such stories of the Church of Scotland consolidating congregations and selling surplus or unsuitable properties have been common for decades, as these are methods for managing excess churches resulting from a long trend of shrinking membership and the complex history explored earlier. This trend was observed in 1977.

The result is that in every city and town and in many villages and country places buildings formerly used for worship have been demolished, used for other purposes or are derelict. Often there were two or three buildings in a district simply because there had been two or three denominations and not because the number of worshippers required them (Dunlop 1977: 20).

This trend of church closure has only continued to gain momentum. By 1991, an average of 12 churches were sold each year. Then in 2017, the CofS initiated a plan to divest itself of 50 churches per annum, with the ultimate goal of downsizing 40% by 2027 (Young 2018). Examples around the time of my fieldwork that garnered news coverage include the 2018 closure of 20 out of 31 churches in Shetland (Murrie 2018), and the 2020 decision for three congregations in Dundee to merge (Meiklem 2020). One minister I met told of how he had been responsible for merging three congregations into one before moving to his current church, which was itself the product of a merger a few years before it narrowly escaped closure in the early 2000s. As we stood outside the front doors of his church at the end of our meeting, he looked up at the red sandstone building he had earlier described as far too

large and costly for their needs as a small congregation, and said, 'It's just a matter of time, really.'

Whilst a decline in membership fuels the closure of many churches, I will take a moment to clarify that some churches are closed because their congregations wish to move to more modern or purpose built contemporary spaces that offer greater comfort, accessibility, and modern amenities (Sinclair 2019). This is summarised in the Land and Buildings Plan presented by the General Trustees at the 2019 General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, which states that they want to focus on providing 'well equipped spaces in the right places' (2019c: 2). The new Monifieth Parish Church is one such example. The product of a merger between three area churches, this new congregation decided to leave the 1813 St Rule's church in favour of a versatile and environmentally conscious new £2.3 million facility in the centre of town (Church of Scotland 2019; See also: McKeown 2021). This is important to note because, despite overall trends of contraction, including reducing the number of presbyteries from 43 to 12, the Kirk is still active in creating new worshipping communities and supporting their existing membership, including through funds raised by the sale of buildings deemed surplus to requirements (2023b).

When it is decided that a building is no longer suitable or needed—because a shrinking congregation can no longer support the building, the building can no longer meet the needs of the congregation, or some other reason—the decommissioning process is initiated. An agreement is reached between the presbytery, kirk session, and the congregation's Financial Board. The Church of Scotland General Trustees are then responsible for the sale of the building. The General Trustees 'support congregations and Presbyteries in maintaining and developing appropriate flexible, robust and sustainable facilities capable of supporting local mission and worship' (2019c: 2). As a corporation with members appointed by the General Assembly, the General Trustees are responsible for holding and advising on Church properties, including churches, manses (housing provided for ministers), and glebes (land within a parish traditionally used to support the church). The General Trustees impose no restrictions on new uses, unless 'such were being conceived to safeguard the use or enjoyment of adjacent or nearby property in Church ownership' (Church of Scotland 2001: 5).

This official policy reflects the generally permissive attitude towards new uses that I encountered in conversations with members of the Church, with any concerns primarily arising over activities and behaviours being acceptable for the community at large rather than respecting any enduring religious significance. While interviewing one woman inside the former sanctuary she once worshipped in, I asked if she felt that there should be any restrictions on certain activities within the space given its religious origins.

MM: Even though the building is now a community centre instead of a church, is there still a sense that people shouldn't do certain things, or that the space shouldn't host certain activities?

Marie: No, I would say if that there were restrictions to the space, it's not because of the sanctity of the space. It's because of the suitability of what is being offered. The level of nudity might be something that I wouldn't perhaps be uncomfortable with, but I'm not certain that that would be because it was a sanctuary as such. If that door was open and kids were running up and down, I would be worried about what the community would make of that. I think we have a responsibility to the community to ensure that what goes on in here is suitable for most audiences. It would be the same if this was an old cinema.

As the site is now a community centre, any concerns she might have would come from the suitability of activities for its new purpose, not its previous use. Such examples of new uses are discussed later in this chapter.

The General Trustees' *Execution Book of Churches Sold* is a document listing the churches and/or church halls sold, to whom, and their intended new use. However, the fact that the new uses are 'based on indications of intention but some are surmises' and 'no attempt was made to ascertain whether intentions in particular cases were put into practice' indicate a lack of committed institutional interest in the activities of these places after they are sold, as well as a degree of unreliability when working with this record for research purposes (2014).⁹ The following section focuses on the theological foundation that informs the Kirk's relationship with its built legacy, as well as the everyday perspectives of the laity who use and know these places.

⁹ To provide one example, the first record in the excerpt is the sale of Jackson Church in Airdrie for supposed 'community use' in 1975. Instead, the church was demolished and houses were built on the site. Any research utilising this record requires further confirmation of its accuracy.

2.3. Material legacy

On a characteristically overcast Glasgow morning in April 2018, a Church of Scotland representative at the 'Keeping Church Buildings Alive' workshop asked those assembled to look beyond the financial, practical, and material work of closing a church to consider the emotional work of 'achieving closure' after the loss of one's place of worship.¹⁰ 'Closing a church is a grieving process,' she explained to an audience comprised primarily of current and potential owners of both active and former church buildings. As I demonstrate below, her remarks expressed somewhat of a reflexive departure from the Church of Scotland's usual statements and policies on disposal, as she sympathetically centred the emotional experiences of those involved with these places rather than the pragmatic doctrine surrounding material culture in the CofS. This section explores the theological understandings that inform the Kirk's relationship with its material legacy as well as the laity's actual experiences of closure to better understand the context from which places like Bellfield and Clachan Church emerge and evolve. Beyond my own interests here, the topic of the Kirk's relationship with its built legacy is important because, as one of the largest property owners in Scotland, the ways in which it views and disposes of churches has widespread implications for communities and others with any connection to or interest in these ubiquitous places (HEACS 2009: 3).

The relationship between a Christian denomination and its churches is often simplified as being either Roman Catholic or Protestant in nature: 'in short, Protestants see place as ephemeral, while Roman Catholics see it as permanent' (Renn 2014: 19). In this view, 'Protestantism tends to de-emphasize the church, the physical, place, and the transcendent', placing a low value on sacred aesthetics and separating spirituality and worship from the materiality of the church rather than viewing these as embodied in it (ibid: 21).¹¹ This stark duality inherently loses the nuance of experience and expression across denominations and individuals, however, for my purposes here it shall suffice to say that the

¹⁰ This event was organised by Built Environment Forum Scotland, in partnership with Historic Churches Scotland (formerly Scottish Redundant Churches Trust), Scotland's Churches Trust, and The Prince's Foundation.

¹¹ For more on the history and interpretations of church architecture, see: Kieckhefer 2004; Balthasar: 2009; Brown et al. 2017.

Church of Scotland can be viewed as a strong example of this Protestant perspective towards its material culture and built legacy.

From ministers to laity, when speaking with members of the Kirk about their buildings, responses always included some variation of the maxim 'the church is the people, not the building', sternly denying buildings any sanctified identity. In the opinion of the General Trustees, who are responsible for the sale of buildings: 'Our land and buildings are but a resource for worship and mission' (Young 2019). An unknown member of the former Portobello Old Parish Church poetically described their seaside location in a way that encapsulates this perspective.

Our building is a treasure. Beautiful and immediately recognisable.
Without people, however, it is only a beautiful shell washed up on the beach.
With people, it is bursting with life, colour, vibrancy, hope and love.
With you, our collective life is enriched and we pray that your life will be enriched (Portobello Old Parish Church 2016).

The building is 'only a beautiful shell'; it is the people who bring meaning and life. In this perspective, when a congregation departs, the building becomes 'but a resource' to support the remaining membership and their mission through proceeds from its sale (Young 2019).

This attitude towards its built legacy, which rejects any innate religious value, is also expressed in the fact that the Kirk does not consecrate or otherwise declare 'sacred' its buildings or churchyards, in line with the Protestant tradition described above. The consecration of a church is official recognition of the site as a place of worship in perpetuity in the eyes of both the Church and the law (Church of England 2019). The rite may also be perceived as imbuing a place with spiritual value or presence. Consecrated status means that churches entering new uses and ownership may require a process of deconsecration, or the removal of this status and its associated affects. As this is not the case with the CofS, their sites are in this sense easier to transition into new uses (Church of Scotland 2001: 1).

Similarly, there is no effort to 'unchurch' these places by removing or obscuring their religious symbolism and material references. At Bellfield, for example, the tall wooden pulpit was left with its brocade banner bearing the burning bush emblem of the Church of Scotland and an old hymn book, while carvings of angels, stained glass windows of biblical scenes, and a cross above the organ loft were also left undisturbed. These specific examples are discussed further in the discussion on Bellfield in Chapter Four. What to do with the

fixtures and fittings of a closed church is at the discretion of the General Trustees, who include them in the sale unless the congregation successfully proposes their removal to another CofS church or related building (Church of Scotland 2001: 2). The default position to include such features in the sale is in stark contrast to the Roman Catholic churches studied by Beekers (2016; 2018) in the Netherlands, where church authorities required overtly religious features and symbols be covered, altered, or destroyed. He describes visiting a church where 'stained glass windows had to be removed and crosses on the walls filled with putty' to make features of the once sacred space unidentifiable before its new secular use (2016: 40).

There are also no official ceremonial requirements for the congregation to follow when a church is closed. According to the General Trustees' statement on church disposal, 'there will normally be a closing service which should incorporate an expression of thanks for the use of the property as a church over the years' (2001: 1). In speaking with individuals who have experienced such events, there is a general format they choose to follow, where a bible and select liturgical objects are removed after a final service, but the decision on how to symbolically close the church is theirs. They are also responsible for the 'furnishings and moveable objects', with the Trustees advising that 'it does the image of the Church no good if a building is handed over to a new owner with the interior strewn with old bibles, hymn books and abandoned ecclesiastical artifacts' (ibid.: 2). This almost flippant description of their own material culture again demonstrates a lack of inherent religiosity in the opinion of church leadership. The process of a final service was recalled by one woman whose lifelong church was closed and converted to housing.

Maria: There were a lot of tears on the last day, you know. It's heart-breaking. There was the final service in the church and we carried out all the elements to decommission it as a church. To close it.

MM: And what did that process entail? What did it mean to decommission it as a church?

Maria: It was just a last service to sort of say goodbye and thanks to the building and its history. What did we carry out...? The bible went. Some of the communion silver was taken out. And the christening bowl. I think that was mainly it.

MM: Was that dictated by any Church rules or was it up to the congregation and what they wanted to do?

Maria: No, I think it was just up to us. Then the next Sunday these things were welcomed into the other church, so they went forward from one church into the other. The two churches that merged in with a third all took in elements they chose to mark the start for a new congregation.

The heartbreak she describes is at odds with impassive official language regarding churches being 'but a resource', indicating a greater complexity of emotion and experience than may be suggested by policy alone as well as a need to include a variety of opinions and experiences when considering topics surrounding church closure.

These emotions are the complex reality acknowledged by the speaker from the CofS at the start of this section, and one minister I spoke with who had long noticed such emotional connections with place explained it by saying that 'the ties of the congregation are usually stronger than the ties of the ministers, because they're rooted here longer'. This is relevant for the material legacy of a church in that it may explain motivations behind what is removed or left behind, as well as attitudes of former congregants regarding new uses. Awareness of underpinning institutional perspectives and the experiences of local congregations allows for a more comprehensive view of closure and the context from which former churches evolve. The experiences of the laity are particularly important in instances of community reuse, as the former congregation is still present and, as I found through my own fieldwork and will discuss later in the thesis, new owners are sensitive to the fact that these individuals recently lost a place of worship, and their own actions may be affected in response.

2.4. Reuse

With the history of the Kirk and the nature of its church closures now addressed, this section discusses the adaptive reuse of these places in Scotland. This practice was introduced earlier as the reuse of buildings for purposes other than that for which they were originally constructed. In discussing contemporary reuse, I take particular guidance from a publication by the Scottish Civic Trust (SCT), which describes insights from an extensive national study of church reuse and identifies considerations for successfully transitioning to different categories of use (2006). As my interest is community reuse, I will focus on this category and contextualise their findings with examples from my fieldwork.

In Scotland, the 'redundant church' is synonymous with the Church of Scotland, as the dynamic history and ubiquity of the Kirk, its downward trend in membership, and theological pragmatism towards its buildings have resulted in the majority of closed churches coming from its considerable ranks, which represent 70% of all ecclesiastical buildings in Scotland (Scottish Civic Trust 2006: 5). In its discussion on the reuse of churches, the SCT describe the Kirk's dominance in this respect, though Episcopal buildings are briefly mentioned as well; Roman Catholic churches are described as rarely falling redundant (1981: 25).

In their report 'New Uses for Former Church Buildings', the SCT present several thematic categories of reuse: Commercial, educational institutions, recreational, residential, and multiple use (2006). This valuable research also includes 101 real examples of new uses, though it is noted that during their work they were 'able to identify some 130 uses, suggesting that finding a new role for a former church is not as difficult or daunting a task as many anticipate' (ibid.: 2). These range from climbing centres to libraries and youth hostels (ibid.: 18). Despite the versatility demonstrated by this list, the report also identifies a number of factors that influence the use of a former church, though these will vary depending on the circumstances of each project. These are summarised below and enriched with examples from my fieldwork.

The first necessary consideration is the surrounding context of the building and the potential social, economic, and environmental impact of the new use (Scottish Civic Trust 2006: 8). In the case of Bellfield, for example, the campaign for a community buy-out of the church grew from arguments that such a venue—'a place to belong', as its motto states—would have a positive impact on the wellbeing of the surrounding community through the social and economic opportunities and experiences its spaces can facilitate. Its context in a residential neighbourhood, however, raise concerns over noise levels and parking availability. Attempts are made to mitigate such potentially negative impacts by promoting use of nearby public transportation, installing bike racks, and maintaining an open dialogue with neighbours. At one point while working in the Bellfield administrative office, I was asked to deliver letters with the following excerpt to all surrounding residences to notify them of an upcoming festival.

Whilst Bellfield is a working building with consent to operate as a gathering space, we also take our relationship with our neighbours very seriously. We want to ensure that you know about upcoming events and have a direct line of communication to clarify any issues and to voice concerns.

Such ongoing awareness and consideration for the building's context and potential impact have proven to be an important part of reusing the former parish church.

Another consideration is for church contents and fixed elements, such as pews, galleries, and pulpits, as 'a church building's structure, its spatial qualities, materials and architectural detail can all affect its suitability for adaptation' (Scottish Civic Trust 2006: 8). More intensive investigations on how community groups navigate the inherited nature of such elements and the impact of this on their experiences can be found in the following case study chapters, however, throughout my fieldwork I encountered other examples of church features incorporated into new purposes. In one such example at the Southside Community Centre in Edinburgh (formerly Nicolson Street Church), the former sanctuary was divided to create an additional upper level, with the rear of what was once the gallery converted into open tiered seating for the large, versatile space. This seating faces the surviving framework from long-removed stained glass windows, as shown in the photo below.¹²

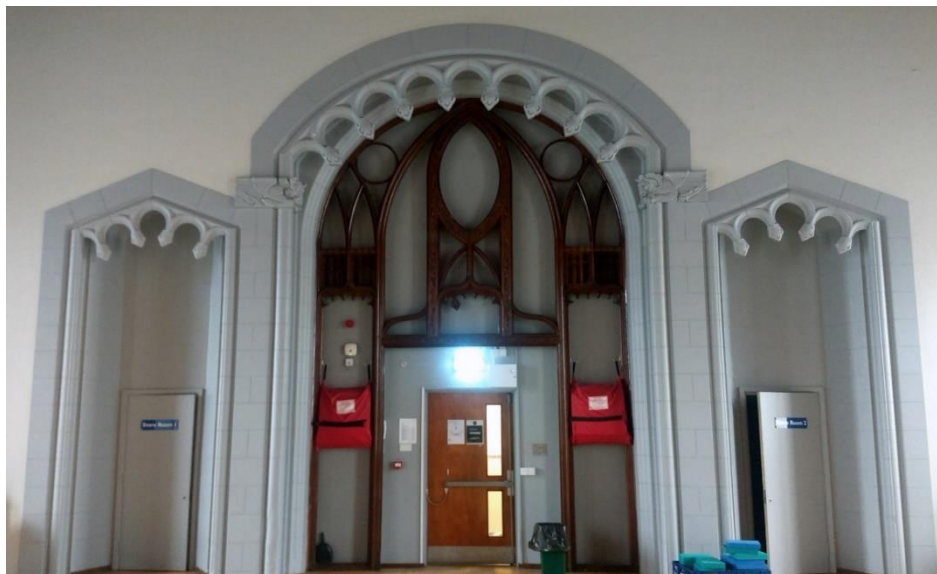


Figure 6. Interior of the Southside Community Centre showing surviving church features incorporated into the design of the multi-use space (Photo by author)

¹² In the case of Southside Community Centre, the City of Edinburgh Council own the building and it is operated by the South Side Community Centre Association. A comparison of community amenities owned and operated by a group like Action Party and those owned by a local authority but operated by a community

The Scottish Civic Trust also advise that consideration should be given to any necessary repairs of the church fabric, which may be costly and extensive due to the large size of many churches and the specialised treatment required for unique features like stained glass. Repairs to the fabric also relate to upcoming considerations of statutory requirements, as a building's heritage status or ownership circumstances may influence the nature of any work done. While visiting the Southside Community Centre in Edinburgh, I was told they could not repair a broken stained glass window because the local authority who own the historic building required three quotes before any repair work could begin, however, the community association who operate the building could not find three qualified professionals to fulfil that requirement. They went to the Tron Kirk, another former church in the Edinburgh city centre with similar windows, but I was told 'there was no help from them. And no help from Historic Environment Scotland either.' This evinces, at worst, a lack of both traditional building skills and resources for users of historic buildings in locating necessary professionals, and at best a need for increased outreach and awareness regarding such resources.

Statutory requirements for the reuse of a church may be multi-layered, as many have been granted listed building status in recognition of their historic or architectural significance, thus requiring additional oversight and consent when changes of use or material alterations are proposed. According to Historic Environment Scotland, the public body charged with the designation of listed buildings as part of its wider remit to 'investigate, care for and promote Scotland's historic environment':

- Listed buildings have characteristics that
- help to create Scotland's distinctive character
 - are a highly visible and accessible part of our rich heritage
 - express Scotland's social and economic past
 - span a wide range of uses and periods
 - contribute significantly to our sense of place (n.d.)

Designations are tiered, with the majority falling into the lowest Category C level, being 'representative examples of a period, style or building type'. Category B buildings, including both Bellfield and Clachan Church, are considered more significant 'major examples'. This makes Category A, the smallest grouping and pinnacle of significance in this system,

group would be beneficial in understanding the strengths and weaknesses of such circumstances and determining best practices for future projects.

‘outstanding examples’ (Historic Environment Scotland n.d.). Restrictions on use and alteration are scaled according to this metric of significance, however, applications for listed building consent are decided on a case-by-case basis by the local authority and are open to commentary by concerned parties, such as heritage groups and neighbours, and may be advised on by Historic Environment Scotland.¹³ Approximately 2600 places of worship are listed (McNeish 2018), with some 1700 belonging to the Church of Scotland (Young 2018). The Kirk thus has ‘the largest collection of listed buildings owned by any one organisation’ and that listing persists when these buildings are sold, making the issue of navigating statutory heritage requirements a common occurrence when attempting to reuse former churches (Young 2019: 3).

In addition to the potential need for listed building consent, local level planning permission is also required, as ‘a change of use and alterations will require planning consent, and any new works required to facilitate that change will require a building warrant’ according to the policies of the local authority (Scottish Civic Trust 2006: 8). These are processed in much the same way as listed building consent, including public view and comments on applications through online planning portals. The Scottish Civic Trust report recommends early consultation with local planning authorities to secure guidance and knowledge of best practices for the particular circumstances of a project (ibid.).

One consideration not mentioned in the SCT report is the shifting of exemptions and requirements when a church transitions to a new use. Prior exemptions for ecclesiastical buildings no longer apply, such as exemptions from the listed building consent process described above (Historic Environment Scotland 2019a). The breadth of these changing requirements caught some members of Action Party by surprise, as one woman described in an interview.

What limited us from opening right away was because the church closed as an organisation and as a building, and then reopened with a new organisation. Exact same building but reopened as something different. So we had to meet new regulations and registration requirements. We had to meet new fire standards. We had to meet new health and safety standards. We had to organise installation of the electrics. Then work needed to be done on safety checks. The roof was leaking when we got it, so that had to be fixed. I didn’t imagine it would be so much just to open

¹³ For more on procedures surrounding designation and other policies impacting the historic built environment, see: Historic Environment Scotland 2019b; 2023b; The Scottish Government 2014a; 2014b.

the doors again. A lot of the limitations to us opening were because we were a new organisation with a building that hadn't needed to meet previous regulations but suddenly now it did.

It may not have been the case that the church was officially exempt from all of these considerations, but as such a long-time feature of the local community it was simply overlooked or 'run under the wire', as this interviewee put it, and the transition to a new use brought the building under fresh regulatory scrutiny.

Another consideration raised by the SCT report is how the new use will impact graveyards or carved stones, if such features are present. As Bellfield is often full of children, safety is a primary concern regarding remaining memorial stones there. The majority were relocated against boundary walls or the building in the 1960s when the church cleared the grounds to make room for two halls. Some of these relocated stones are pictured below.¹⁴ What remains of the former burial ground has long been inactive and used primarily as a green space. Soon after taking ownership, Action Party had a stonemason conduct a condition survey of external memorials in an effort to be responsible stewards of these monuments while also maintaining a safe environment (Mulligan 2017).



Figure 7. Bellfield exterior showing a row of broken and overturned headstones removed from their original positions prior to Action Party taking ownership (Photo by author)

¹⁴ The transition of the Portobello Old Parish Church graveyard to halls and a courtyard remained somewhat of a mystery during my time there and would require more in-depth local research to determine when and where burials and headstones were moved. Several stones were set against a boundary wall or laid flat on the ground by the church prior to community ownership. I encountered some amused commentary within the community that the uncertainty surrounding potential graves on the site protected it from interest by developers.

In another example, when it was noticed that one large headstone had cracked, a local mason was promptly brought in to lay the stone down and prevent it from becoming a hazard, particularly to children who might attempt to climb the stone.

Meanwhile at Clachan Church, surrounded on three sides by an active graveyard that also serves as an important genealogical tool for members of the Scottish Diaspora, the primary concern of Clachan Lochbroom Heritage Trust is maintaining a respectful posture towards the graveyard and its visitors. Important to note here is that the Church retained ownership of the burial grounds, pictured below. Concern over ‘inappropriate’ uses in the presence of the graveyard was voiced as one reason why the church should enter community ownership rather than become a hostel or other use perceived as producing ‘unsightly bins and noise’ deemed inappropriate for the setting.



Figure 8. View of the active graveyard at Clachan Church, looking to the northwest towards Loch Broom (Photo by author)

Recalling how the Scottish Civic Trust identified commercial, educational, recreational, residential, and multiple uses as categories of new purposes found for former churches, community ownership as seen at Bellfield and Clachan Church constitute what is described as recreational use. They ‘maintain the cultural and social function of the building albeit in a different form’ (2006: 20). Other examples provided for recreational use include Cottiers Theatre (former Dowanhill Parish Church) and the Centre for Scottish Culture (former St. Andrew’s in the Square Church) in Glasgow, the Strathnaver Museum (former

Parish Church of Columba) in Caithness, and Avertical Wall (former St Mary Magdalene's Episcopal Church) in Dundee, which is currently an indoor climbing centre but has also been an auction house and served other non-religious uses since it was sold in the 1950s (Scottish Civic Trust 2006). 'Large church auditoria lend themselves well to performance and event spaces, often without major alterations to the original church architecture', while the setting of an often historic local landmark maintains 'a connection to the local community and expression of its cultural heritage' (ibid.: 20). These objectives—creating spaces in which to gather while maintaining a sense of local connection—were prominent in both of my case studies and, I would argue, are a defining feature of community buy-outs more broadly, explaining why churches may be an appealing building type for such aims.

Organisations such as Historic Churches Scotland (formerly Scottish Redundant Churches Trust) and The Church Buildings Renewals Trust were created to 'bring underused or redundant church buildings back into community life' (McNeish 2018). Established in 1996, Historic Churches Scotland does so by taking ownership of threatened sites and working with surrounding communities, securing the survival of churches by making them 'strong social, cultural and economic assets' (National Churches Trust 2023). The Church Buildings Renewal Trust, established two years earlier in 1994, serves a more advisory and advocacy role by hosting conferences and workshops to promote successful church use by both communities and congregations (McNeish 2018).

2.5. International trends

Scotland is far from the only country experiencing a strong trend of church closure, as denominations from Australia (Clark 2008) to Canada (Lynch 2011; Allen 2019), Sweden (SVT Nyheter 2019), Germany (Bendavid 2015) and others grapple with demographic and cultural shifts resulting in the closure of places of worship. In 1989, the Council of Europe produced the report *Redundant Religious Buildings* which voiced concern over 'the very considerable number of religious buildings throughout Europe no longer fulfilling their original function' (HEACS 2009: 11). Since the early 2000s, the issue of churches falling surplus to requirements in Scotland in particular has been described as one of the 'most severe' in Europe (Scottish Civic Trust 2006: 2). In addition to establishing the wider context

of redundancy and reuse, this section places my case studies of community reuse in relation to current trends and indicates potential areas of future comparative research.

Other national churches in Europe are selling off their places of worship in high numbers. 'National church' here refers both to religious institutions strongly associated with a particular country and those that are recognised as the dominant state church by their respective governments.¹⁵ Some, such as the Church of Scotland and the Church of Sweden, have transitioned away from official state church status to be independent national churches. The Church of Sweden (*Svenska kyrkan*), a Lutheran denomination, has sold 100 churches since the year 2000, with many of these being converted into homes, schools, and museums, or used by other Christian groups (Sveriges Radio 2015; SVT Nyheter 2019). The Church of Norway (*Den norske kirke*), also Lutheran, is reportedly emphasising renting out its unused churches to other denominations, with particular interest from immigrant communities, rather than outright selling them for reuse (International Lutheran Council 2017). Others, like the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland, have been experiencing prolonged periods of overall decline in membership but do not appear to be divesting themselves of many properties, which may or may not yet occur (Hannikainen 2020). Perhaps the most relevant of Churches to use in contextualising the situation of closure and reuse in the Church of Scotland, however, is the neighbouring Church of England.

As the Kirk represents the issue of church redundancy in Scotland, so the Anglican Church does in England. As the national church, the Church of England (CofE) has 'by far' the largest estate of all denominations in England, with many properties recognised as significant and afforded statutory protections from alteration through a listed building process similar to the one discussed above (Monckton 2010: 4). An important feature of the CofE and a point of contrast with the Church of Scotland, however, is the consecration of its

¹⁵ There are distinctions between national and state churches, however, for my purposes here 'national church' serves to encompass them all. To clarify, the difference is in their relationship with the government. For example, the Church of Scotland is a national church but not a state church, as 'in matters of doctrine, government, discipline, and worship, the Church of Scotland is free of State interference' and its leadership do not hold places within the government (2023c). It was a state church prior to 1921 and the passing of the Church of Scotland Act. This is in contrast with the Church of England, where 'Anglican bishops are members of the House of Lords, but there is no place as of right for the Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. And while Church of England Measures (laws) require parliamentary oversight, the Church of Scotland is entirely self-governing' (Torrance 2022: 5).

churches, meaning that closure and reuse often involve a process of deconsecration.¹⁶ English Heritage report that between 1990 and 2010, 514 Anglican churches were closed. It also provides the following statistics on reuse: 26% vested with the Churches Conservation Trust; 20% converted to housing; 11% used for other Christian denominational worship; 11% adapted to civic, cultural or community uses; 10% used as monuments; while the remaining 22% represent a range of shopping, office, educational, storage and other uses (Monckton 2010: 9).¹⁷

Evident from this breakdown is the significance of passing buildings into the care of the Churches Conservation Trust, ‘the national charity protecting churches at risk’ (2023d).¹⁸ Originally established in 1969 as the Redundant Churches Fund, this organisation emerged as a partnership between the Church of England, the government, and private interests. In 1971, they took ownership of their first church, St Peter’s at Edlington, and by 1979 they were responsible for 147 properties. The organisation was renamed The Churches Conservation Trust in 1994 (2023b). As of 2022, 350 churches have been vested with the Trust, which undertakes an estimated 20 conservation projects each year. The activities of the charity include ‘repairing the damage from sometimes years of neglect, and work with local communities to bring them alive again’ through new uses (2023d).

Without our care and your support, the buildings we look after might have disappeared completely. Instead they are enjoyed as cultural, social, tourism and educational resources, kept open, in use and living once again in the heart of communities (2023a).

Critical to this mission is the work of their Regeneration Team, whose expertise in ‘community regeneration, planning and social enterprise, historic conservation, site interpretation and project management’ are made available to local communities seeking to ‘breathe new life into churches’ through reuse (2023c).¹⁹

¹⁶ As described in guidance related to consecrated buildings in the Church of England, ‘only a consecrated building can be a parish church but a parish may exist without a parish church and have instead a consecrated or unconsecrated parish centre of worship (or another building licensed by the bishop for worship)’ (2019).

¹⁷ ‘The CCT is registered as a charity (number 258612). It’s [sic] governing document is the Mission and Pastoral Measure 2011. It’s [sic] main object is the preservation, in the interests of the nation and of the Church of England, of redundant churches and parts of churches of historic and archaeological interest or architectural quality vested in the Trust, together with their contents’ (Charity Commission for England 2022a).

¹⁸ It should be noted for clarity that only Anglican churches are vested in the Churches Conservation Trust.

¹⁹ For more on the Regeneration Team, projects in which it has been involved, strategic map, and awards, see: *Regeneration Impact Report 2020*; *Regeneration Consultancy* n.d.

Historic England describe two other trusts as national ‘safety nets’ for places of worship, each with a distinct ethos regarding the places in their care (Chapple 2012: 4). One is the Friends of Friendless Churches, a non-denominational charity established in 1957 that owns 60 churches across England and Wales.²⁰

We rescue and repair historic buildings, by undertaking gentle repairs, sensitive restoration, and careful conservation. We champion traditional methods and support local communities by employing local crafts and trades-people wherever possible. Thanks to local volunteers — our eyes and ears on the ground — our churches remain open year-round. We celebrate the history, art, architecture, and science of our sites, sharing their beauty and brilliance with people across the world (Friends of Friendless Churches).

The emphasis here is on retaining churches as heritage places rather than the CCT approach to keeping them open and engaged with by facilitating new uses. The third and smallest organisation is Historic Chapels Trust, which is distinct in that it is the only charity dedicated to non-Anglican sites.²¹ It owns 20 places of worship representing the religious and architectural diversity of Christianity in England.

Historic England report that ‘the range of new uses is very broad, including community, domestic, retail, office, educational, industrial, sports, museum and entertainment use’, yet it is not uncommon for the Church to place restrictions ‘so as to avoid what it considers improper use’ impacting the building or its significance as a former place of worship (Chapple 2012: 1). This presents a stricter approach to reuse compared with the Church of Scotland, described earlier as no longer imposing restrictions unless a neighbouring church property is considered to be negatively impacted.

Despite the preponderance of Anglican churches becoming redundant, other denominational churches comprise the majority of those that come into community ownership as analogues of my own case studies in Scotland. Saltburn Arts Theatre and Community Hall was a Primitive Methodist church in Saltburn-by-the-Sea, just east of Middlesbrough, and has been in community use since 1968 (Theatres Trust). The Granville

²⁰ The Friends own historic but redundant churches in England and Wales that would otherwise have been demolished or left to fall into ruin. The charity also has at its disposal the Cottam Will Trust which disburses grants for the embellishment of churches in use’ (Charity Commission for England 2022b).

²¹ As for Historic Chapels Trust, their mission is ‘to own for the benefit of the public generally redundant churches chapels meeting houses and non-Anglican places of worship in England of outstanding architectural and historic interest. To secure for public benefit the preservation, repair and maintenance of its buildings including and contents, burial grounds and curtilages’ (Charity Commission for England and Wales 2021).

in London is a former Presbyterian Church sold to the local council in 1957 and operated by a local trust since 2017 (South Kilburn Trust). In the 1980s, another Presbyterian church became the Lonsdale Community Centre in Hull (Lonsdale Community Centre). One former CofE example I was able to identify is St Mark's Community Centre in Bath, which was deconsecrated in 1970 and has been used by the local community since (St Marks Community Centre). The reasons for this difference between the CofS and the CofE may be a combination of different perspectives between these national churches towards their buildings, as well as the nature of community ownership in each country, which is a topic explored more in Chapter Three.

Moving away from the Church of England and other national churches, closure and reuse in the Netherlands deserves special mention for its prominent position in international discourse, possibly a result of the country's response to the 'most advanced' trend of church closure in Europe. In 2015, it was estimated that two-thirds of the country's Roman Catholic Churches will close by 2025, while 700 Protestant churches were predicted to close by 2020 (Bendavid 2015: 10). I was first alerted to the importance of insights coming out of the Netherlands by the executive director of Historic Churches Scotland, who recalled a presentation at a European religious heritage conference given by a member of a dedicated Dutch government initiative concerned with re-purposing churches.

What was so extraordinary about his presentation is that we're so used to people from all these different countries in Europe saying, 'Oh it's such a disaster. It's really awful because all these churches are closing.' All doom and gloom. Seeing it only as a problem that needs to be solved. But he stood up and said, 'In the Netherlands, we see this as a huge opportunity. We see this as a chance to re-purpose these buildings in a meaningful way, and actually it's very advantageous for communities.' Then everyone was saying, 'Wow, this is just... extraordinary.' It was fascinating to see the whole thing turned on its head.

This open and positive perspective towards reusing churches is part of a broader trend of embracing the adaptive reuse of historical places in the Netherlands, which is encouraged through multiple levels of society, from successful public-private partnerships for developments to supportive government policies (Meurs & Steenhuis 2017).

In 2011, the Dutch Ministry of Heritage reported that 1,340 churches had been reused since 1975 (Netsch & Gugerell 2019: 49). After considering 110 such examples, Netsch and Gugerell (2019) identify categories of reuse—community-based, mixed use,

commercial, and residential—highly reminiscent of those described in the earlier report by the Scottish Civic Trust. Some examples include conversions to apartment housings, use as an indoor skate park and arena for other recreational activities, library, café, offices, and versatile community spaces. The prevailing approach to adaptive reuse behind such conversions, where unused historical buildings are opportunities for creative new uses, was the subject of a 2019 traveling exhibition by the Cultural Heritage Agency within the Dutch government. *Reuse, Redevelopment, and Design: How the Dutch Deal with Heritage* was intended to spark international discussions on keeping historical buildings as active parts of contemporary life through reuse. As the director of Erasmus Huis, a Dutch cultural centre in Jakarta, Indonesia where the exhibit was temporarily on display, described: ‘instead of demolishing the buildings, the Dutch Government is more interested in revitalizing them, making them attractive and useful to the community’ (Independent Observer 2020). This echoes what was said at the religious heritage conference and the desire to see old buildings as places of potential.

The Netherlands has also produced considerable academic interest in reuse (See: Velthuis & Spennemann 2007; Remoy & van der Voordt 2014; Netsch & Gugerell 2019; den Boer 2020). As closed churches still have the power to ‘evoke vivid public debates’ on not just the future of Christian material culture but the very nature of these places as both religious sites and heritage places, current research like that of anthropologist Daan Beekers (2018) considers experiences of closure and reuse for secular purposes and by other faiths. Such research output and the general perspective towards adaptive reuse established briefly over the last few paragraphs explain why the Netherlands is a prominent figure in international discussions on both the closure and adaptive reuse of churches. And as another country facing a steep increase in surplus churches, the Dutch experience provides a valuable point of comparison and insight for Scotland.

The purpose of this section was to establish that the Church of Scotland is not alone in its experiences of closure, and that the reuse of former places of worship is likewise an ongoing international phenomenon in which my two case studies are but a small part. Reuse by communities emerged as a common theme, indicating rich potential for further comparative research and even perhaps collaboration or networking to share experiences and strengths. Where Scotland in particular may contribute to such discussions is its unique

and growing emphasis on ownership by community bodies, which forms the focus of the following chapter.

2.6. Discussion

Over its long history, the Church of Scotland has amassed the largest collection of ecclesiastic buildings in the country, many of which are recognised for their heritage value and ascribed statutory protections. As the Historic Environment Advisory Council for Scotland summarise, the development of the Kirk has resulted in a surfeit of churches that are increasingly being ‘disposed of’.

To put it briefly, the ecclesiastical history of Scotland has created an historic overprovision of churches by competing Presbyterian denominations. Associated with this inescapable factor are the effects of demographic change, manifested through population change and, more dramatically, changes in the nature of religious adherence within society... Many churches have become redundant and have been disposed of (2009: 3-4).

As these buildings become surplus to requirements, they are sold to a wide variety of new owners and uses, reflecting the Kirk’s theological perspective that a ‘church is the people, not the building’. The current situation in Scotland, where the General Trustees are seeking to dispose of 40% of their properties by 2027 to focus on ‘well equipped spaces in the right places’, is part of an international trend of church closure and reuse (Young 2019). A report by the Scottish Civic Trust reveals the diverse new uses these former churches are put to in Scotland, including ‘recreational’ use by communities that encompass the case studies of Bellfield and Clachan Church presented in this thesis. Such community endeavours have been greatly influenced by recent evolutions in legislation aimed at facilitating community ownership of land and buildings, which will now be explored in the following chapter.

Chapter 3. Building Community

As this project is concerned with self-described and legally recognised community groups, this chapter considers how such groups come together and are defined in contemporary Scotland, particularly with regards to their ability to own property. I begin by presenting the topic of landownership in Scotland from the perspective of a member of Action Party, who introduces earlier grassroots community efforts that advocated against generations of land inequality and influenced the trajectory of legislation in Scotland. This history is then explored in greater detail, leading to the ongoing evolution of land reform legislation and its impact on community ownership. Most notably, this includes the Abolition of Feudal Tenure (Scotland) Act 2000, Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003, and Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015. A critical look at legal guidelines for the recognition of community bodies establishes the framework in which my informants at Bellfield and Clachan Church must work to define themselves as viable legal entities, and I explain how this is held in tension with the complex lived reality of their everyday understandings and manifestations of community. This chapter also describes the development of a network of support available from both government and independent entities to promote community ownership. To conclude, I place the movement described throughout this chapter within an international context and argue that it represents a uniquely Scottish approach to land reform. The discussion now begins with an interview I held with a member of Action Party, as the topic turned to her thoughts on community ownership in Scotland.

3.1. 'Oh, the rottenness of landownership in Scotland'

The former church was quiet for now, its old stones warming in afternoon sun that glanced through a nearby window and across the table where I sat with a member of Action Party, the local charity that had owned and operated the building as a community hub for the past year. Soon the shouts and laughter of children entering the nearby courtyard for after school activities would begin to seep through the walls—not enough to disturb our conversation, but a subtle reminder of the life that continues to fill this place.

'Do you have any thoughts on what might be fuelling the increase in community ownership that we're seeing across the country right now?' I asked.

'Oh, the rottenness of landownership in Scotland. Its unevenness,' she answered quickly, and with an emphasis that told me she had much more to say on the topic. 'Whenever I go up to the Highlands, I do kind of think, "Why is this empty? There's something wrong." So, the Scottish Government have taken the subject on and enable legislation to make this kind of thing'—she gestured loosely to the space around us, originally the foyer of the sanctuary and now a meeting room, classroom, rehearsal space, or whatever else its users want it to be—'possible. The originators, the Gigha people, and the people that had Eigg, they were the proper trailblazers. I remember thinking, "So you can fight the big boys!" And they did it without the new legislation that's been coming out.'

The community-owned isles of Gigha and Eigg, located in the Inner Hebrides off the west coast of Scotland, are frequently cited as early victories in the movement for community empowerment through land ownership. Eigg's community buyout occurred in 1997, followed by Gigha in 2002. Now the community hub in which we sat is itself considered a trailblazer, having been the first to successfully utilise recent legislation regarding community ownership in urban areas.

'But the fact that you still have to fight so hard... it's wrong.' She slumped back against her seat, an edge of frustration in her voice. 'Seeing buildings lie derelict and being unable to do anything. Seeing things go to waste. Or seeing things go to developers who don't develop what you want or actually need in your community is all totally disheartening. But I do think this legislation is empowering and it tackles the hopelessness of feeling frustrated at not being able to change things in your local area.'

'Landownership is a really important issue, then.'

‘Oh yeah. It has always bubbled away as a topic, especially the big Highland estates. Scotland is rich in land, so why are only a few people benefitting from it? Why do we let places go to waste? Why don’t we prioritise community amenity? All these things come into my mind as I lie awake at night.’

This conversation introduces the dynamic climate of landownership and community empowerment through land reform felt at the time of my fieldwork in 2018/9, as well as the historical roots from which it developed. Perhaps most importantly, however, this information is presented through the lens of someone navigating—with mingled optimism and frustration—the evolving legal frameworks and processes involved in a community buy-out. I give voice to such perspectives throughout this chapter, keeping my discussion informed by the people involved and providing additional context for the case studies in chapters Four and Five.

3.2. The history of landownership and the start of a movement

The case studies presented in this thesis are just two examples of a trend towards community ownership in Scotland. To fully understand this unique and accelerating movement, it is necessary to establish its origins in historical landownership practices. This history is itself a massive topic, encompassing ‘a complex interplay of land agitation histories, economic power struggles, political discourses and cultural accounts’ (Danson and Burnett 2021: 281). Consequently, in this section I provide a general overview in which to situate the following presentation of ‘the proper trailblazers’—rural buy-outs credited in the above interview as sparking the contemporary movement for community ownership.

The ‘land question’ in Scotland is by no means new. In 1873, jurist John Macdonell wrote that ‘All men love land, and the land question comes home to all’ (1873: 1). The ‘question’ being a broad reference to land ownership, management, and related policies. Historically, Scotland’s system of landownership was the most inequitable in Europe, developing over the centuries through what Wightman describes as five distinct ‘land grabs’. These are ‘feudalisation, the appropriation of Church property, legal reforms in the seventeenth century, the division of the commonties and the nepotistic alienation of the common good wealth of the burghs of Scotland’ (2015: 5). These evolved into the situation

today, where a small number of individuals still hold ‘vast swathes’ of the landscape (ibid.; see also: Lawrence 2022).²²

At the end of the 20th century, where the current movement for land reform traces its roots to efforts I will discuss shortly, it was estimated that 25% of land was held in estates of 30,700 acres or more by just 66 landowners, with a further 66% held in estates of 1,200 acres with 1,252 landowners (Dalgish 2010: 376). Thinking back on the 1980s, one of my informants recalled a theatre troupe from Glasgow named ‘784’: ‘And they were named that way because seven percent of the population owned 84 percent of the land, and they worked in a political theatre’. As mentioned in the earlier interview, much of this inequality was based in the Highlands and Islands, where great estates and generations of economic and social instability concentrated ownership in the hands of a wealthy few rather than those who lived and worked on the land (Hoffman 2013: 290; Danson and Burnett 2021: 282). Consequently, this region would become the cradle of Scottish land reform (Hart and Bryden 2000; Chenevix-Trench and Philip 2001; Dalgish 2010).

Historically, portions of these large estates were often rented to subsistence farmers in the form of small agricultural units called crofts. The land holding system of crofting is unique to Scotland; the Highlands and islands, where the majority of crofts are located, is home to the ‘six crofting counties’ (Danson and Burnett 2021: 281).²³ In this arrangement, however, the land that entire communities relied upon ‘was in the hands of often absentee landowners and lairds, with community economic, social and political development dependent on their desires and plans’ (ibid.: 283). Eventually, agitations against the abuses and tenure insecurities of this system resulted in the first of a series of land reform acts: The 1886 Crofters Holdings (Scotland) Act, ‘ensuring security of tenure, fair rents and compensation for permanent improvements’ (Crofting Commission; see also: Evans et al. 2022: 8).

²² Wightman’s *Who Owns Scotland*—first published in 2011, then again in 2013 and 2015 as the social and legislative landscapes surrounding ownership continued to shift—was recommended to me by several unrelated individuals throughout my fieldwork, testifying to its influence amongst those involved in community ownership efforts. One quote also references ‘commonties’, which I will elaborate here as a form of land tenure unique to Scotland where an area of land is shared between parties (Land Reform Review Group 2014: 42).

²³ These are the ‘former counties of Argyll, Caithness, Inverness, Ross & Cromarty, Sutherland, Orkney and Shetland’ (Scottish Crofting Federation). These were merged into the current Highland, Orkney, and Shetland council areas in 1996.

In 1965, the Highlands and Islands Development (Scotland) Act was passed, creating the Highlands and Islands Development Board to promote social and economic development in the region, including through the acquisition of land to be held or developed for the benefit of the people. Following the Enterprise and New Towns (Scotland) Act 1990, this organisation re-emerged as Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE), and shortly thereafter backed a community buy-out in Assynt now described as ‘paving the way for community land ownership and development’ (HIE 2015). It is to this ‘trailblazer’, as my interviewee at the start of this chapter described it, that I now turn.

3.2.1. ‘Trailblazers’ of community ownership

The purchase of the 21,300 acre North Assynt Estate by Assynt Crofters Trust in 1993 is generally cited as the start of the modern movement for community ownership and land reform. In 1989, wealthy landowner Edmund H Vestey sold this land on the northwest coast—home to thirteen townships—to a Swedish company that failed and went into liquidation shortly thereafter in 1992. As a result, the estate was to be carved into seven parcels for sale. In the opinion of local residents, there was ‘no concern being shown for the impact of this process on the crofting activity of the inhabitants’, which sparked collective action and the creation of Assynt Crofters Trust (Assynt Crofters Trust 2020).²⁴ A summary of events provided by the Trust presents public perceptions of their work as an ‘audacious’ and even righteous attempt to ‘win back’ the land.

At a public meeting called a few weeks later, a proposal, judged by some to be bordering on the lunatic, was put to those present, that an attempt be made to raise sufficient money for the crofters to bid for the Estate themselves... On July 1 there appeared the first of many reports in the national press about the audacious attempt of a few motley crofters in the remote NW Highlands to win back the land of their forefathers. The campaign caught the public imagination, donations began to roll in and negotiations began in earnest with the Liquidators (ibid.).

An agreement was reached in December of 1992 and the title passed to the Trust in February of 1993—‘an historic date in the struggle to change the laws of land tenure in Scotland, to enable the ordinary people who live and work on the land to have some control

²⁴ Their efforts were aided financially by the Scottish Crofting Federation (formerly Scottish Crofters Union) and Caithness & Sutherland Enterprise.

over their own economic future' (Assynt Crofters Trust 2020.). Reflecting on this watershed campaign, Chenevix-Trench and Philip describe the publicity surrounding it as helping bring the issue of reform from the margins—seen as the work of 'radical campaigners'—to the mainstream, where the Trust was even consulted by the Scottish Government in 1995 on the prospect of transferring crofting land to local trusts (2001: 141).

In 1997, this momentum expanded from community ownership of land to archaeological and built heritage sites with the founding of Historic Assynt.²⁵ This group was established to acquire the ruins of Ardvreck Castle and Calda House, as well as the intact Old Kirk at Inchnadamph. In addition to restoring the Old Kirk in the early 2000s for use as a local heritage and interpretation centre, they worked to conserve the castle and manor ruins and conducted archaeological surveys at other area sites. During my fieldwork in Ullapool, 23 miles south of the kirk at Inchnadamph, the work of Historic Assynt was briefly raised in conversation with members of Clachan Lochbroom Heritage Trust as another regional example of a community taking ownership of a church. However, my informants did not appear familiar with work in Assynt beyond their ownership of the church, indicating a gap where a stronger network of communication between communities engaged in similar projects may be beneficial.

The next 'trailblazer' is the Isle of Eigg Heritage Trust, which took ownership of the island on behalf of the local community in 1997 in a campaign that reflected developments in how communities owned land and evolving government attitudes towards such practices.²⁶ The small Isle of Eigg was purchased 'after years of instability, neglect and lack of secure tenure' (Isle of Eigg Heritage Trust). This example is held as unique for its 'partnership approach' and attention to environmental concerns, where the local community as represented by the Eigg Residents Association, the Scottish Wildlife Trust, and Highland Council serve on the board of the Trust (Chenevix-Trench and Philip 2001: 144).²⁷

²⁵ SC027390 is the official Scottish Charity Number of Historic Assynt. Numbers in this format are often found on official documents, webpages, and references to charities in Scotland. This practice is highly recommended as it allows the organisation to be 'easily recognised by members of the public, funders and contractors as a regulated Scottish charity in which they can have confidence' (Scottish Charity Regulator 2011: 26). As an important piece of identifying information for many organisations, it will be noted in the first reference to an applicable organisation being discussed from this point on. It may be noted that the Assynt Crofters Trust did not have such a number and that is because they do not have charitable status. The nature of Scottish charities and how they are involved in community buy-outs is explored later in this chapter.

²⁶ SC025609 is the official Scottish Charity Number Isle of Eigg Heritage Trust.

²⁷ SC005792 is the official Scottish Charity Number of Scottish Wildlife Trust.

Chenevix-Trench and Philip describe how, on the day of the Trust's successful purchase, the Scottish Office requested that Highlands and Islands Enterprise establish the Community Land Unit to help such grassroots community efforts purchase and manage land (2001: 144).²⁸ This 'represented the start of a significant shift in status for community ownership', as the government had begun, for the first time, 'to actively promote community ownership and management, and crucially to offer financial support for up to 10% of the acquisition costs' (ibid.). In the years following the buy-out, the Isle of Eigg has become an icon of sustainability and community empowerment through local ownership and investments in renewable energy (Forrest and Wiek 2015; Gardiner 2017).

The third of the 'key bellwether buyouts' preceding the landmark Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 was the purchase of the Isle of Gigha by the Isle of Gigha Heritage Trust in 2002 (Lovett and Combe 2019: 224).²⁹ The case of Gigha is considered particularly remarkable for their use of grants from the newly established Scottish Land Fund (SLF) and an innate commitment to environmental sustainability. Upon recommendation from The Land Reform Policy Group—established by the Scottish Office in 1997 to reflect increasingly 'widespread recognition that many aspects of Scotland's system of land ownership needed to be modernised' (Land Reform Review Group 2014: 24)—The Scottish Land Fund was established in 2001. The SLF was financed through the Green Spaces and Sustainable Communities programme of the New Opportunities Fund, a UK Lottery-funded initiative, and ran until 2006 (Bryden and Geilser 2007: 30). The SLF was intended to support rural community development by funding 'ownership activities' and was a clear indicator of official shifts towards supporting such grassroots efforts (Rural Analytical Unit 2012: 32). According to Bryden and Geisler, by 2005 the SLF had provided £12m in financial aid to approximately 200 communities, the Isle of Gigha being one of the first (2007: 30).³⁰

²⁸ Braunholtz-Speight explains that 1997 is also significant as 'the election of a Labour government at UK level in 1997 changed power relations around land in multiple ways. The new government's Scottish Office Minister, Brian Wilson, was associated with HIE's establishment of the Community Land Unit in the same year. Most obviously, the Labour victory led to devolution and new institutions at Scotland level' (2015: 131). The latter is discussed in the following section on actions taken by the devolved Scottish Parliament.

²⁹ SC032302 is the official Scottish Charity Number of Isle of Gigha Heritage Trust.

³⁰ A new iteration of the Scottish Land Fund, capitalised by the Scottish Government in partnership with Highlands and Islands Enterprise and the National Lottery Community Fund, was established in 2012 and is still active as of 2021. For more on its history, impact, and opinions on current activities, see: Reid 2015; French 2016; Diffley 2021; Wilson 2022.

The islanders purchased Gigha in 2002 with the aid of £3.5m from the Scottish Land Fund and £500k from Highlands and Islands Enterprise, though the SLF required £1m to be reimbursed by 2004 (Isle of Gigha n.d.). A groundswell of local support resulted in the swift repayment of this £1m.

In true Gigha style, the islanders rose to the challenge and the funds were raised by the community through soup 'n' sandwich days, ceilidhs, quiz nights, sponsored rows around the island, the sale of Achamore House and many more ventures. The one million pounds was paid within a year (ibid.).

This feat is all the more impressive considering the island's population of approximately 100 at the time. This number has grown to over 160 as of 2018, and the Trust indicates promising trends in population, infrastructure, education, and commerce (ibid.).

The Isle of Gigha buy-out has received additional attention for the Trust's commitment to environmental sustainability. In his discussion of community-owned energy initiatives in Scotland, Gubbins describes how the Trust set up the UK's first community-owned wind turbines, known as the 'Dancing Ladies of Gigha' (2007: 80). This emphasis on sustainability through community ownership and management was also seen in the previous example of the Isle of Eigg and will be discussed in the upcoming analysis of my fieldwork at Bellfield in Chapter Four. While not a dedicated focus of this project, the prevalence of this perspective amongst community initiatives in Scotland makes it an important subject for further research (see: McMorrann and Scott 2013).

Assynt and the isles of Eigg and Gigha were not the only instances of community ownership at the time, however, they loom large in recent memory and discussions on the topic for their status as watershed moments in the movement for land reform and community empowerment through ownership.³¹ During the same period in the late 1990s, the highly publicised John McEwen Memorial Lectures on Land Tenure are also credited as raising public awareness of the topic (Wightman 2015: 315). This growing trend of support, seen through the evolving circumstances of the above examples, entered a new phase with the establishment of the devolved Scottish Parliament in 1999 and its early attention to reform through 'sweeping change in the distribution of rights regarding land' (Hoffman 2013: 289).

³¹ Another example is the Knoydart Foundation's purchase of the Knoydart Estate in 1999. Its official Scottish Charity Number is SC026246.

3.2. A new era of land reform

The purpose of land reform must be to achieve a more equal distribution of land ownership and of the economic and political power which is associated with it.

–Bryden and Hart 2000: 2

‘What I’ve seen is that the movement for land reform in Scotland comes from the ground,’ one of the original community organisers at Bellfield explained during an interview. He then described how the movement developed from grassroots activities like the above examples, rather than ‘coming from on high’ within the government.

You have the 2003 land reform act and that is often described as being the kind of start of land reform, as if it was something dreamt up by politicians or civil servants. And obviously it’s not, because you had Assynt back in 1993 and Eigg in 1997 and so on. You had the actual shifts in community happen from communities, and then the politicians pick up on it, then the civil servants get their teeth into it, and then you get legislation.

I have endeavoured to reflect this ‘bottom-up’ evolution through the structure of this chapter, opening with the individual experiences of another community organiser in Portobello followed by the influential ‘trailblazers’ who agitated for reform in their communities prior to official land reform legislation. This section now turns to developments since the 1999 opening of the devolved Scottish Parliament, paying particular attention to elements impacting the efforts and experiences of the communities at the centre of my case studies.

As the previous cases demonstrate, the issue of community landownership was already established when the Scottish Parliament opened on 12 May 1999 and land reform was taken up as an early cause. During a John McEwen Memorial Lecture the year prior, then Secretary of State for Scotland Donald Dewar made a statement on the subject that has become an oft-quoted representation of the prevailing perspective at the time: ‘There is undoubtedly a powerful symbolism—which attracts me greatly—of land reform being amongst the first actions of our new Scottish Parliament’ (Reid 2019). Brauholtz-Speight points to reasons why land reform was taken up as an early cause. ‘Firstly, the Scottish Parliament inevitably has greater interest in Scottish issues than the UK parliament – and more time to consider them’, naturally representing what was an increasingly prominent issue in Scotland but not the rest of the UK (2015: 131). As one of my informants recalled

her father saying: 'You'd never have got that money for it [the buyout] if it was from Westminster'. Brauholtz-Speight also points to the structure of the Scottish Parliament and the comparative absence of a House of Lords, many of whom would likely be large landowners and thus potentially less inclined to support land reform (2015: 131; see also: Glass et al. 2013).

Changes to the legal landscape of land ownership began swiftly and have continued to develop. The first piece of land reform legislation to emerge was the Abolition of Feudal Tenure (Scotland) Act 2000, which replaced the ancient feudal system with a 'system of outright ownership' (Chenevix-Trench and Philip 2001: 141). From this first session of the new parliament also emerged the landmark Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003. This Act is particularly important as, in addition to the public 'right to roam', it introduced the legal mechanisms of rural and crofting Community Right to Buy (CRtB).³² The establishment of rural CRtB 'provides the opportunity for communities across Scotland to register an interest in land and buy that registered land, at market value, once it is offered for sale' (Community Land Team 2016a: 2). Subsequent legislation has expanded and refined the realm of CRtB, directly impacting one of my two case studies with strong implications for other communities seeking to take ownership of local churches, as will be explored later.

Guidance from the Scottish Parliament Information Service regarding rural CRtB explains that 'Part 2 of the Act provides for Community Bodies (CBs) to register an interest in rural land, to which they have a direct connection. Land is defined as to include fishing and mineral rights' (Reid 2015). This short explanation requires some unpacking of what is meant by *community bodies*. The Act sets out strict criteria for community groups who wish to qualify to engage in CRtB; 'appropriate community bodies are defined in the Act so that their constitution ensures that they represent the local community acting on its own behalf in owning property and undertaking other activities' (Land Reform Review Group 2014: 97).³³

³² As for the 'right to roam', 'Part 1 of the Act sets out a right of responsible non-motorised access for recreational and other purposes, to land and inland water throughout Scotland, with a few exceptions. The Scottish Outdoor Access Code sets out where access rights apply and what can be done within access rights. It also describes where access rights don't apply, such as fields of crops or the gardens of houses' (The Scottish Government n.d.).

³³ It should be noted that that 'community bodies' appears both capitalised and in lowercase in official documents and guidance; unless providing a direct quote I utilise the lowercase for stylistic continuity.

According to the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003, a group interested in triggering CRTb must establish a company limited by guarantee (CLBG) or a Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisation (SCIO).³⁴ While these structures are introduced here as necessary for understanding the Act, they will be considered in relation to my case studies in the upcoming discussion of more recent developments. For a company limited by guarantee, The Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations sets out the following definition.

A company is a membership organisation formed and registered under the provisions of the Companies Acts. It is incorporated and benefits from limited liability for its members.

It's a structure that can be chosen by voluntary sector organisations that employ staff, regularly enter into contracts, manage investments, and/or own property and other assets, because limited liability helps to minimise the threat of personal liability for the directors.

It is regulated by Companies House and subject to the Companies Acts and other legislation. If a company is charitable then it will be subject to charity law and regulated by OSCR as well (2021).³⁵

While not required for the CRTb application, many of these CLBGs decide to obtain charitable status, which potentially comes with both advantages and disadvantages—such as different funding opportunities and administrative requirements—depending on the unique circumstances of each group (OSCR 2021b).

The community body may also take the form of an SCIO, or a Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisation. This is 'a legal form unique to Scottish charities and is able to enter into contracts, employ staff, incur debts, own property, sue and be sued. It also provides a high degree of protection against liability' (OSCR n.d.). A key feature of applying to become an SCIO is that the proposed organisation must pass the 'Charity Test', proving its existence is for the public benefit. 'If the sole intention, initially, is simply registering an interest in land under Part 2 of the Land Reform (Scotland) Act, this alone is unlikely to be regarded by OSCR as sufficient activity to provide public benefit and the organisation would therefore be unlikely to pass the Charity Test' (OSCR 2021a: 1-2). From an administrative perspective, it also takes longer to establish an SCIO than a CLBG, which can delay a

³⁴ This was expanded to include community benefit societies (BenCom) after the Co-operative and Community Benefit Societies Act 2014, however, I did not encounter any groups utilising this structure so I will not consider it further. Comparisons of organisations utilising these different legal structures is an area of potential further research.

³⁵ OSCR being the Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator.

community's ability to register their interest in a property (ibid.: 3). Consequently, SCIOs are less common amongst Community Right to Buy applicants, though a Company Limited by Guarantee may change to this form at a later date.

To officially establish a community body in the opinion of the Scottish Government, those involved must define the community, which is done geographically by postcode, postcode units, 'types of area as prescribed' such as an electoral ward or Community Council Area, or a combination of these (OSCR 2021b: 3). The Community Land Office of the Scottish Government even provides an online map tool to assist with the process (ibid.). As the Act at this point applies only to rural communities, their populations are limited to 10,000 or fewer. In the perspective of this legislation, then, a community is both a geographically identifiable and quantifiable entity.

Once an organisation is established, they must submit an application to register an interest in the property. 'Community bodies can register an interest in any land, such as churches, pubs, estates, empty shops, woodland, fields and more. Community bodies can also register an interest in rights such as salmon fishing rights and certain mineral rights' (Community Land Team 2016b: 2). These applications of interest are maintained by the Keeper of the Registers of Scotland in the Register of Community Interests in Land (RCIL).³⁶ This registration is valid for five years, after which it may be applied for again, and it must be filed before the property is put up for sale.

CRtB is triggered if there is an active register of interest when a seller moves to put a property on the market. If the seller remains willing to go forward—as CRtB cannot force the sale—and the organisation confirms their desire to make the purchase, the community then has eight months to raise any necessary funds and complete the purchase at the commercial asking price (Community Land Team 2016b: 15). Of course, this is assuming the community body has submitted a timeous application—'made when no action has been taken by the landowners or creditor with a view to transfer the land' (ibid.: 6). By contrast, 'late applications are applications which are made when the land is on the market or where any action has been taken with a view to transfer the land to be registered', which then

³⁶ The RCIL is meant to be largely transparent for the public, however, 'due to unforeseen circumstances' this repository has been unavailable for the duration of much of this project.

require considerably more supporting information (ibid.). The various steps of the entire CRtB process are subject to the oversight and approval of Scottish Ministers.

Similar to the process of rural Community Right to Buy described above, 'The Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 gives crofting communities the right to acquire and control the croft land where they live and work, and to acquire the interest of the tenant in tenanted land' (Community Land Team n.d.a). Unlike rural CRtB, however, this can be triggered at any time and force the landowner to sell. According to the Scottish Government, there have been two applications for crofting CRtB: The Galston Estate Trust and the Pairc Trust, both on the Isle of Lewis.³⁷ Both also withdrew their applications after successful negotiations with landowners and proceeded with their purchases without utilising CRtB (ibid.).

In a brief aside, the 'Big Society' also emerged around this time and described domestic policies in England focused on shrinking government involvement and devolving responsibilities to the local level.³⁸ It is addressed here as I encountered occasional references to this ideology in conversations about community ownership in Scotland at the time of my research. According to one of my informants, rather than the actual policies themselves, references to the 'Big Society' is used as a pejorative description for actions by local authorities and others 'where they see people's concern and care for each other and think, "Well we can privatise this. We can make you do it",' rather than providing what should be a service for the public good. This emerged when Portobello Town Hall was abruptly closed at the end of my fieldwork year, sparking discussions of whether the community should take ownership of it in light of Bellfield's success.

There will be a lot of people saying, 'We should not have to be doing this, the council should.' And they should. They should be retaining control of it. But they won't. So then you're faced with the realpolitik of 'do we take this into community ownership or do we lose it to a large development?'

³⁷ The Galston Estate is a community-owned estate of 56,000 acres of coast, agricultural land and moor in the North West of the Isle of Lewis in the Outer Hebrides of Scotland. The estate comprises 22 villages running from Upper Barvas to Port of Ness with a population of nearly 2,000 people. The estate passed into community ownership on 12 January 2007 to be managed on their behalf by the Trust' (Galston Estate Trust 2022). Its Scottish Charity Number is SC036903. The Pairc Estate is considerably smaller in size and population. 'In total, there are 213 crofts on the estate, spread between 11 townships. The estate is mainly hilly moorland with a large number of fresh water lochs. The community consists of around 400 residents plus a number of others who manage crofts in the area' (The Pairc Trust n.d.). Its Scottish Charity Number is SC035193.

³⁸ For more on the 'Big Society' see: Danson and Whittam 2011; Scott 2011; Atkinson 2012; Woolvin et al. 2015.

I only occasionally encountered this kind of criticism, where it is felt that communities are forced to mobilise grassroots efforts because local or national government actions are deliberately insufficient or negligent; perhaps this is because my research focused on churches rather than other building types. It is likely that such criticisms were more prominent when the town hall closed due to its municipal nature. This discussion indicates a need to understand the diverse circumstances surrounding triggers for community buy-outs, of which I investigated only small a part.

Returning to the timeline of land reform in Scotland, the next important piece of legislation to emerge—and perhaps the most significant for community groups like those I worked with—was the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015, which amended the earlier 2003 Act and broadened the realm of Community Right to Buy from rural areas with populations lower than 10,000 to urban areas, as well as to ‘abandoned or neglected land’ (Reid 2015: 3).³⁹ Another avenue to ownership called Community Asset Transfer was also introduced, whereby community bodies can ‘take over publicly-owned land or buildings in a way that recognises the public benefits that the transfer will bring’ (Community Ownership Support Service n.d.).⁴⁰ For my purposes, I focus on the expansion of CRtB to urban communities, as this encompasses the purchase of property from a private seller like the Church of Scotland and was the route taken by Action Party in obtaining Portobello Old Parish Church.

³⁹ This new legislation was the result of extensive reviews of land reform thus far, including recommendations for further developments. Work leading up to the landmark Act of 2015 includes the Community Empowerment Action Plan published by the Scottish Government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities in 2009, and the work of the independent Land Reform Group established by the Scottish Government in 2012, whose final report in 2014 included 60 recommendations.

⁴⁰ One successful example of Community Asset Transfer is the purchase of a former public school in the Newhaven area of Edinburgh by Heart of Newhaven Community, Scottish Charity Number SCO49919. Their campaign began in 2018—I attended one early public meeting—and the official SCIO was established in 2020. Their right to buy under the Community Asset Transfer scheme was approved in July 2020, funding was secured from the Scottish Land Fund in 2021, and (after delays due to the Covid-19 pandemic) keys were obtained on 15 August 2022 (Heart of Newhaven Community 2023).

3.3.1. Urban Community Right to Buy

Much of the guidance from the earlier rural Community Right to Buy (CRtB) remains the same, so rather than re-state the general process I now explore it through the experiences of Action Porty and their purchase of Portobello Old Parish Church, which happened to be the first successful application of urban CRtB.⁴¹ I interviewed multiple members of Action Porty about their experiences of this process, during which they presented the same overall picture of perseverance through demanding requirements as well as an awareness and humility regarding their favourable circumstances.

So the process was difficult. I mean it was very demanding in terms of what we had to fulfill, in terms of the percentage of people who need to be signed up to it and so on in an urban context as opposed to a few hundred people on an island. But we were very blessed, and you have to take your blessings and run with them. So we worked incredibly hard but we were very lucky.

These ‘blessings’ were in the form of fortuitous timing, with the new community empowerment act coming into effect the day before their meeting to discuss a community buy-out, the generally engaged nature of the Portobello community as explored more thoroughly in Chapter Four, and a volunteer pool with professional skills and experience related to supporting community initiatives, social organising, and navigating legal documents. I will now address this last point regarding relevant skills and knowledge within the community before exploring Action Porty’s successful navigation of the CRtB process.

Extant knowledge and experience within the population can be a key difference between urban and rural community initiatives, as denser urban communities are more likely to produce a variety of backgrounds amongst the membership that benefit the administrative and legal negotiations necessary for ownership (see: Abel et al. 2014; Cattaneo et al. 2022). This general disparity was clearly reflected in my own case studies, where the suburban Action Porty leadership had multiple organisers with backgrounds benefitting a community buy-out whilst the rural Clachan Lochbroom Heritage Trust did not present any such relevant expertise during my time with them.⁴²

⁴¹ SC047358 is the official Scottish Charity Number of Action Porty.

⁴² SC047544 is the official Scottish Charity Number of Clachan Lochbroom Heritage Trust.

Despite the benefit of available knowledge and experience at Bellfield, navigating the new urban CRtB legislation proved daunting. When I asked one woman about the application process, she just groaned and said, ‘Oh my god, so complicated. So complicated.’ After recovering from this seemingly unpleasant memory, she explained further.

So I did find reading and understanding the documentation arduous, really hard going, especially a couple of the points. But it turns out that it had been written wrong! So we had to write back and now they’ve changed it, or altered the wording because it just didn't make sense. Here I was just going round and round and round thinking, 'I'm so stupid, I don't get it'.

In addition to the task of navigating novel legislation, they were confronted by mistakes or ambiguities that complicated the process further. Since their experiences as ‘first over the barricades’, as one individual involved described it, changes like those described above and increased efforts to educate and support groups interested in CRtB have attempted to reduce such difficulties. Examples of outreach and education include the work of the Community Land Team in the Land Office of the Scottish Government, established by the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003, and organisations like Community Land Scotland and Development Trusts Association Scotland.⁴³

It is not just a matter of educating communities, as sellers also have to navigate the evolving legal landscape of CRtB. ‘It's been a learning curve for everyone,’ one of my informants concluded after describing working through misunderstandings by the Church of Scotland. As he points out, this was concerning because the Kirk owns and is in the process of selling many properties across the country, some of which other communities may attempt to purchase utilising CRtB.

⁴³ Community Land Scotland, Scottish Charity Number SC041864, describes their purpose as facilitating a ‘collective voice for community landowners in Scotland’ (2022). Their membership—including Action Party—represents the diverse communities, land, and buildings involved in community ownership and serves as a network for support, education, and advocacy. Development Trusts Association Scotland (DTAS or DTA Scotland), Scottish Charity Number SC034231, is ‘an independent, member-led organisation which aims to promote, support and represent development trusts in Scotland. Established in 2003, DTA Scotland now has over 300 development trust members – community-led organisations using a combination of enterprise and creativity to improve the quality of life for local people in urban, rural and island communities across Scotland’ (DTAS n.d.). The Community Ownership Support Service at DTAS is funded by the Scottish Government to support community ownership through asset transfer. DTAS also established the Scottish Universities Land Unit, which encourages law students to engage with land reform and related issues.

The Church of Scotland mistakenly believed that if there was outside interest they couldn't just give it to the community. But if you think about it, it's theirs to give away or to deal with. So the only way they thought they could justify the community taking it was forcing us into the Community Right to Buy process. So it was a misunderstanding of the CRtB process, and I've reported back to the Scottish Government to say, 'You guys have got a responsibility here. If the Church of Scotland, who've got thousands of properties, don't understand this, then there's a bigger awareness job to be done.'

He also points to a lack of awareness regarding evolving funding options that make community ownership a more viable option than it may have been previously.

And it was partly because when you spoke to the guy [at the General Trustees] he wasn't confident that communities could take on these buildings. He was completely unaware of how the funding regime had changed. Like, he asked how we got money to buy the church and I had to explain that sort of stuff. He had no idea what support system was out there now to enable this buy-out.

As a result of this initial experience with CRtB, another informant described how the Church of Scotland began working with Development Trusts Association Scotland 'to try and develop an asset disposal route map to say what you should do'. I cannot speak to the General Trustees' internal discourse on the issue, however, their willingness to work on producing additional guidance implies positive developments and presumably improved experiences for future community groups utilising this legal mechanism.

With these issues surrounding the novel nature of the urban CRtB process now addressed, I will provide an overview of how Action Party successfully utilised it to purchase Portobello Old Parish Church. This is while keeping in mind that the complex legal process of the buy-out itself is contextual to my primary interest in community ownership and has already been the focus of a scholarly article by Lovett and Combe (2019) as well as featured in numerous media outlets (BBC 2017; McAllister 2021; Roy 2021) and highlighted by the Scottish Land Commission (2022). The buy-out campaign is addressed in Chapter Four.

Action Party was established on 11 August 2016 as a company limited by guarantee, in compliance with CRtB legislation and intent on acquiring the former Portobello Old Parish Church from the Church of Scotland to be used as a community hub.⁴⁴ It then obtained

⁴⁴ As of July 2022, Action Party have been in the process of transitioning to a development trust, stating that 'our company articles include the advancement of: community development, urban regeneration, citizenship, environmental protection, recreational facilities, the arts, heritage and culture, and relief of those in hardship'

charitable status in March 2017. According to guidance from the Scottish Government, in addition to being ‘properly constituted’ as a CLBG, SCIO, or community benefit society, a group looking to register interest must have at least 10 members, 75% of whom reside within the geographically defined community (Community Land team 2016a). This leads to a consideration of how Action Party defined their community, both within the constraints of this legislation and in everyday practice.

Establishing a geographic community boundary is important for the CRtB process, as the ability to register interest relies upon obtaining evidence of support from a minimum of 10% of those listed in the voters roll for that area (Community Land Team 2016b: 7).⁴⁵ It is recommended that this be done through a petition list (ibid.). According to one trustee, they decided upon a surrounding area defined by major roads and breaks in housing density. This area had a population of 7,500, of which 5,500 were listed in the voters roll, making 550 the minimum number of supporters needed. One woman reflected on how this was done with ‘a mind to expand later’, as canvassing was a demanding task and they had limited time to gather necessary signatures.⁴⁶

This was a balancing act, because we needed to reach a threshold of support in a local ballot: set the boundaries too wide, and we would have an unreasonable number of signatures to collect; set it too narrow and we ran the risk of being seen as parochial and self-interested (Cameron 2019: 5).

After deciding upon this area, door-to-door canvassing work was undertaken by volunteers under the guidance of local ‘Green Party activist Mary Campbell, now a city councillor, who had vast and detailed experience of canvassing across the ward’ (ibid. 2019: 3). While discussing this activity, one woman explained how she ‘loved going around and collecting signatures. The door-to-door bit is fascinating. I’ve never done that before.’ After submitting enough signatures Action Party successfully met the requirements

This is to fulfil their larger organisational mission, which sees Bellfield as the first component of a wider benefit. ‘We have been asking not simply “How do we save this building?” but “How can Party organise as a community to better recognise and meet our needs, our challenges and our opportunities?”’ (2021). There were discussions of this transition during my fieldwork, however, the final decision was made after I departed and as such I cannot comment on it.

⁴⁵ In some circumstances, Scottish Ministers may accept less than 10%. If an application is considered ‘late’, meaning that action is already being taken to sell the property in question, the percentage required is considerably higher (Community Land Team 2016a: 2).

⁴⁶ At the first AGM in 2018, after the CRtB process was successfully completed, it was voted to expand the organisational boundary to approximately double those numbers.

to register interest in the parish church on behalf of their official wedge-shaped seaside community.

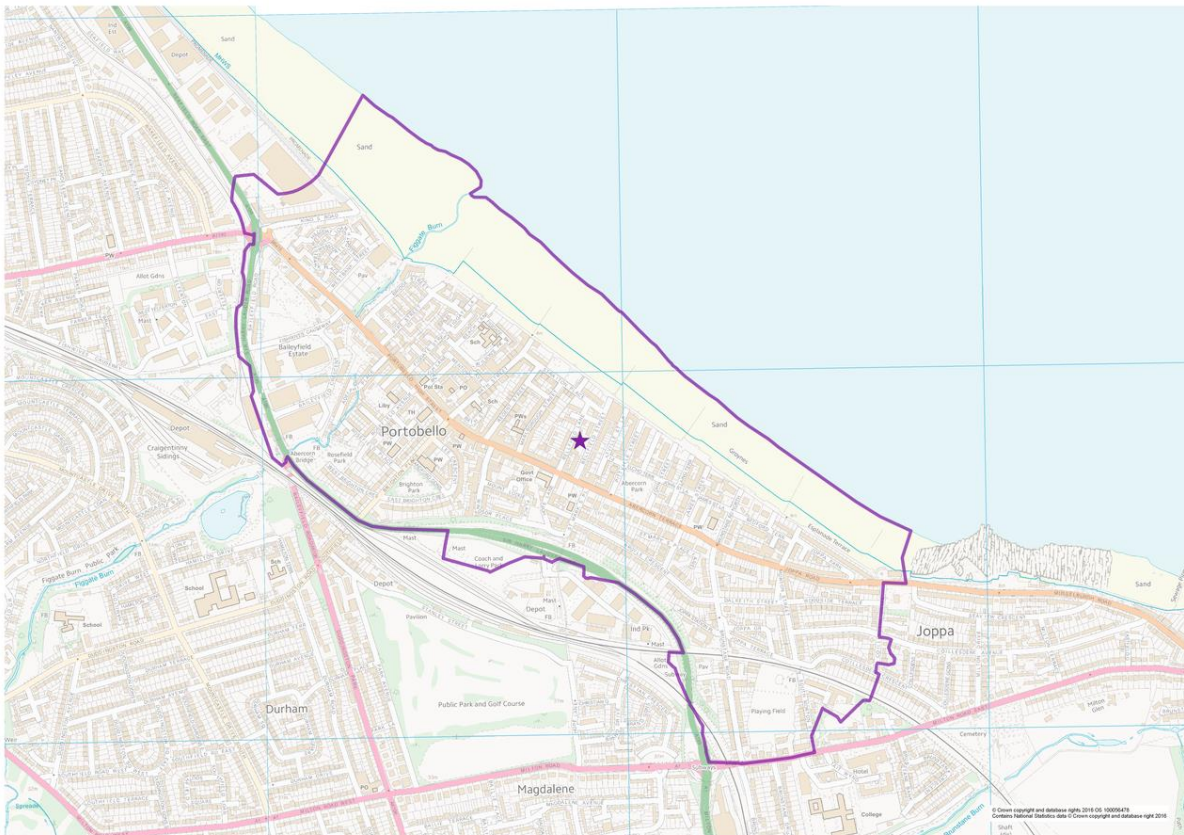


Figure 9. Map of Action Party's boundary at the time of the buy-out (Created by Action Party and used with permission)

There exists a tension, however, between *community* as recognised and ratified by the legal processes involved in CRtB and *community* in practice as a dynamic social process. The diverse applications and manifestations of the concept are acknowledged in the Land Reform Review Group's 2014 report to Scottish Ministers, which concludes that because discussions of land are centred on places as geographically defined, it follows that conceptualisations of community in this context should be similarly understood in proximity to places. This is as opposed to more spatially nebulous communities of interest, which may exist in relation to communities of place. As for community organisations, the report by the Land Reform Review Group presents the following definition.

Community controlled organisation: an organisation that is not-for-private-profit, has a defined geographical area of operation (typically at the level of village, neighbourhood, town or similar), is accountable to those who live within that area, and is democratically run... Such organisations may exist to serve the interests of the whole community of place or specific communities of interest within this (2014: 82).

During my fieldwork, I observed that deciding upon such boundaries and defining a community are evolving and at times uncertain processes, despite seemingly straightforward definitions put forward in legislation and guidance notes.

One Action Party trustee described 'deciding the boundary' as one of the 'biggest hurdles' of the buy-out because it felt difficult to determine 'how far people perceive Portobello to be', demonstrating how the organisation is forced to navigate differing interpretations and articulations of their community. Asking my informants for their own opinions on the nature of their community provided important insights into tensions in which notions of identity are held. In an explanation given by another member, he describes both a defined community of place and a wider, subjective community of interest:

The challenge is always where to define that boundary, and where does Portobello start and finish. You've got water there, so one part of the boundary is quite clear. And to the west I suppose you've got King's Road as the last residential area, beyond which is Seafield. My instinct is to say let people self-define. If they think they belong to Portobello then that's great, they should be able to use it and engage with it etc.

As the speaker continues, he reveals necessary negotiations between notions of community as lived and understood, and as legislation mandates it be defined.

But because of CRtB and how you need clarity in government documents and the charity regulator, we have to define that. So we were encouraged by the Scottish Government to have quite a tight boundary just because of the implications to do with the ballot and petition. So you had to hit certain percentages. So initially we talked to about 5.5 thousand people. And then at the AGM expanded that to a more natural kind of boundary, but that still excludes people and housing estates in particular that I would like to include. So for me there's a kind of... an official boundary that's defined in our governance documents, but there's also a grey area about it. I think people should self-define.

In a different interview, this tension between the legal and lived realities of the Bellfield community is mitigated by accepting that both are necessary but not mutually exclusive, creating a space for a more organic and evolving community identity.

It's very much about a community of place and that we are open to everyone. Sure as a charity we have certain key charitable aims and official boundaries, but I'm quite clear—in fact I'm quite adamant—that we're not aiming for any one particular slice of the community. It's for anyone who's interested.

When asked what community Bellfield is meant to serve, another individual favoured a definition based on *relationships* with place rather than merely proximity to it.

Community is created by people's commitment to taking care of the spaces we inhabit together. So the community that Bellfield serves is the community of those who care about Bellfield. That can extend beyond Portobello, to people—like yourself—concerned for all sorts of other reasons. And I would say they're a part of this community too. The community of Bellfield. But the more general sense is a geographic sense of peoples' care for Bellfield.

As these individuals demonstrated, defining a community is more complex than lines on a map, encompassing relationships with place and notions of identity that can be difficult to translate to standardised legal processes.

Returning to CRtB, when a successful application such as Action Party's is approved by Scottish Ministers, it is registered in the Register of Community Interests in Land (RCIL) and the landowner (in this case the Church of Scotland) is prohibited from taking further action to transfer the land until either the community body withdraws their interest, the registration expires, or a decision is made to willingly sell to the community (Community Land Team 2016a: 7). As the Church of Scotland was an unwilling seller, when they moved to sell the property CRtB was triggered.⁴⁷ When this occurs, the community body confirms their intent to pursue the right to buy and Ministers appoint an independent valuer to provide an assessment of the property's value. The community is then consulted once more through a formal ballot carried out by an officially appointed balloter.

This arrived in a plain brown envelope, and was a stark contrast to all the lively visuals that Bellfield publicity had displayed – it was really boring. Our fear was that it would get binned, so there was a further social media campaign to get the vote out. In the event, the support was of North Korean proportions – on a turnout of 51%, 98.7% voted in favour (Cameron 2019: 6).

⁴⁷ It cannot be said with certainty why the Church was unwilling to sell to the community outright and instead forced them into the CRtB process. Throughout my fieldwork, this general attitude towards local initiatives was described as a source of confusion and frustration by several community groups seeking to take ownership of former churches. In the case of the former Portobello Old Parish Church, as one Action Party member posited earlier, there was perhaps a misunderstanding of the new legislation and the Church felt that CRtB was necessary when a community expressed such interest in a highly valued property. Another explanation comes from the perspective of the General Trustees, where their objective is to raise funds to support and further their own organisational and spiritual mission, meaning that sales go to the highest bidder.

This ballot provided ‘a really good statement of collective intent,’ as one member recalled of the final count. When satisfied with the ballot result, Ministers approve the buy-out and grant the group eight months—beginning the day they confirmed their commitment—to complete the purchase (Community Land Team 2016a: 7). The topic of funding will be addressed later, as I will now consider why some community groups, including my other case study of Clachan Church, do not utilise CRtB.

While Action Party were working towards purchasing the former Portobello Old Parish Church through CRtB, approximately 200 miles to the north Clachan Lochbroom Heritage Trust were taking a different route towards the same objective of community ownership. During a group interview with CLHT trustees, I asked if they had considered utilising the new legislation, to which they said that they had, but they ultimately decided against it.

Leah: It was considered... Why didn't we do that? I think the time constraint.

Siobhan: I think it was the time constraint—

Paul: It was the time constraint because the Church of Scotland had put a deadline date on it.

This ‘time constraint’ encompasses several features of the CRtB process that have come under some criticism. As described earlier, CRtB can only be triggered if a recognised community body has registered interest in the property before the seller takes action to put it on the market or enters negotiations with a potential buyer. This requires a community to mobilise, successfully establish an acceptable community body, and successfully complete an application to register their interest all before a property is put up for sale.

However, people may not even be aware that a sale is forthcoming. As one of my informants reflected on their experiences with the Church of Scotland: ‘People need information in advance of your decision when you put it on the market. You can't just assume that the congregation is going to be sufficient. You've got to go beyond that and actually notify people.’ One organiser for InSpire East End, an Edinburgh group who attempted and ultimately failed to utilise CRtB to buy the landmark London Road church, described how the community was not aware of the closure until it appeared in the local news. In a common refrain I encountered when discussing experiences of community buy-

outs, he told me how they were 'working against the clock' to meet the requirements for a timeous application.

The process of submitting community interest before a site is up for sale may prove especially difficult when dealing with churches facing closure, as they still have active congregations who may be pained by the loss of their place of worship. When the application by InSpire East End to register interest in London Road Church was rejected, one former congregant and buy-out organiser told me how 'we were told we should have done more before the building was sold. But it was still an active church, so it would've been like saying "hurry up and die" to this part of our community'. Similar concerns were raised regarding Portobello Old Parish Church where, according to several Action Party trustees, they were very conscious of how 'area churches were in such distress at the time. We didn't want to upset our neighbours by saying "we're going to buy your church" when they didn't know where they were going to go'. The solution to this clearly delicate issue may be in the above recommendation for the Church of Scotland to take greater initiative in disseminating information prior to a building being put on the market, thus allowing communities the opportunity to organise if so desired.

One response to criticisms where communities are 'working against the clock' to register their interest is that Community Right to Buy is not designed to be a reactionary, emergency measure. Communities are meant to establish their interest in a property in advance. 'That's partly why we got the nod from the government,' as one Bellfield organiser explained. 'We had evidence that we haven't suddenly seen an opportunity and grabbed it. We had been working to try and save it even before the new Act.' This was thanks to ongoing discussions on some level since initial rumors of the church's closure began in 2013, several years prior to the actual sale. During an interview with a member of the Community Land Team, they explained a common misunderstanding of the CRtB process and the need to balance the seller's rights against the wishes of a community body.⁴⁸

It's not a magic bullet and it can't apply in all situations. It can't just be handed across like, 'Yes of course you can buy that, that's not a problem.' Because you're interfering with property rights, so we have to have checks. And we can interfere with property rights, that's perfectly within our right, but we have to have good reasons for doing so. We need

⁴⁸ To reiterate, the Community Land Team was established by the Scottish Government to provide guidance on Community Right to Buy, amongst other duties (Community Land Team n.d.b)

groups to demonstrate those good reasons and therefore that's the reason for the process. But that's the nuance that a lot of groups don't quite get and so they often leave disappointed.

As described earlier, efforts are being made to raise awareness and provide educational opportunities on this process. Meanwhile, legislation surrounding land reform and community empowerment through ownership is continuing to expand in scope and nuance, meaning that more groups will likely attempt to utilise these new avenues, especially in light of Action Party's success.

3.3.2. SCIO ownership

While the legal mechanism of CRtB introduced by recent land reform legislation was utilised by Action Party, it is not the only route to community ownership, as my other case study at Clachan Church demonstrates. To enter into the purchase of the church from the Church of Scotland, Clachan Lochbroom Heritage Trust (CLHT) took the legal form of an SCIO. To reiterate:

The Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisation is a legal form unique to Scottish charities and is able to enter into contracts, employ staff, incur debts, own property, sue and be sued. It also provides a high degree of protection against liability (OSCR n.d.).

This legal option was introduced in 2011 and is administered and regulated by the Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator (OSCR). The SCIO's charitable purpose and legal status allowing it to own property while protecting individuals involved against liability appeals to community level initiatives. This structure is also seen with The Pyramid at Anderston, a community centre in the former Anderston Kelvingrove Parish Church in Glasgow. The church was bought by the eponymous SCIO in March 2019 to serve the surrounding Anderston and Finnieston communities.⁴⁹

To form a SCIO, a group must establish a constitution that meets a set of minimum requirements. These are described in greater detail in OSCR guidance, but in summary a constitution must detail: their charitable purpose; membership and trustee guidelines; any desired restrictions on the remit of the SCIO and the remuneration of trustees; its

⁴⁹ SC048144 is the official Scottish Charity Number of The Pyramid at Anderston.

organisational structure; procedures for meeting and managing conflicts of interest; and what will happen to the SCIO's assets upon its dissolution (OSCR 2011: 13). There must also be a minimum of three trustees and two members (ibid.:14). If approved by OSCR, the organisation is then listed in the Scottish Charity Register.

Where the previous exploration of CRtB contained a considerable emphasis on what it means to define a community while working within the framework of this emergent legislation, the issue here is largely a simpler one of membership structure. 'Full membership—voting membership—is for the old Lochbroom parish and associate membership—friends, if you will—is for abroad and elsewhere,' as one CLHT trustee described their organisational structure, following the historical precedent of the area once served by the former church. It is important to note that this was once one of the largest parishes in the country prior to restructuring in 1975, though its population remains dispersed and rural, so their catchment is inherently quite large. The map below shows the size of the parish, and it is described in greater detail in the discussion of Clachan Church in Chapter Five. The Pyramid at Anderston likewise has a two-tier structure: Full membership is limited to those living in the G3-7 and G3-8 postcodes, representing the surrounding urban communities of Anderston and Finnieston, while associate membership is available to all outside that area.

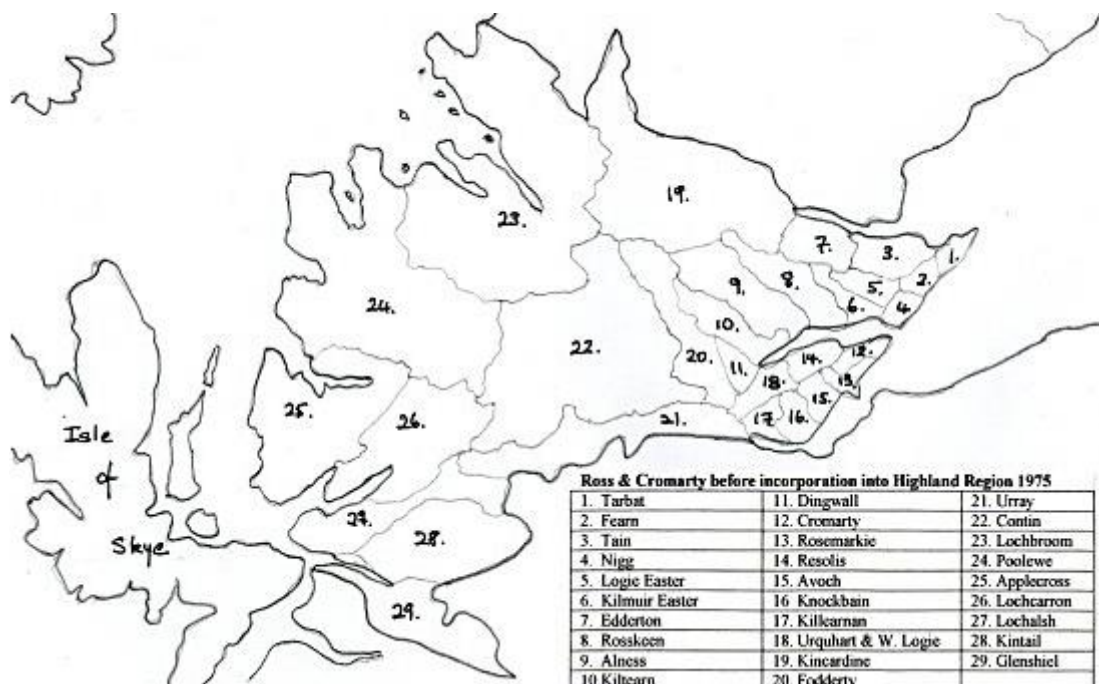


Figure 10. Map showing the parish of Lochbroom, noted as number 23. It is centred around its namesake on the northwest coast. Clachan Church is located at the head of Loch Broom (Ross & Cromarty Roots)

3.3.3. Funding

Whether they need £600,000 for an urban church with halls and facilities like Portobello Old Parish Church or £30,000 for a simpler rural property like Clachan Church, communities require financial support to achieve ownership. This can be through grants, loans, or various fundraising efforts. I will stop only briefly on the topic of funding—primarily to describe topics relevant to my case studies and similar projects of church reuse rather than to present an exhaustive list of available sources and processes—because this aspect of achieving ownership is largely beyond my interests. In particular, I am going to focus on the Scottish Land Fund as an important product of the current trend of community empowerment through ownership, which has also been involved, to varying degrees, with both of my case studies.

The Scottish Land Fund (SLF) was introduced earlier as an initiative that ran from 2001 to 2006 and ‘represented a major new source of funding for asset-based community development in rural Scotland by providing a new mechanism to support ownership activities along with the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003’ (Rural Analytical Unit 2012: 32). After the success of this initial run, it was renewed in 2012 for four years, and in 2016 it was renewed for a further five years and expanded to urban communities for the first time. The current iteration of the SLF is capitalised by the Scottish Government and managed by Highlands and Islands Enterprise with the National Lottery Community Fund (Diffley 2021).

By 2019, the SLF had distributed £21,103,828 to community initiatives from the Shetland Islands to Dumfries and Galloway (National Lottery Community Fund 2019). There are two stages of funding, both of which Action Party successfully applied for. The first is ‘technical assistance funding’, which they utilised to hire a firm to conduct a feasibility study for Bellfield. The second stage is ‘asset acquisition’, at which point the SLF will fund up to 95% of a purchase amount. A minimum of 5% must come from other funding sources. The SLF estimates that their average award will cover 80%, making Action Party’s award of 94% notable (Scottish Land Fund 2020: 5). Shortly after Action Party won funding, the SLF awarded their 100th grant to The Pyramid at Anderston for the purchase of their former church in Glasgow, a celebration of which is pictured on the following page. While Clachan Lochbroom Heritage Trust did not receive SLF funding, they did apply. However, due to the

threat of losing Clachan Church to other interests, they felt compelled to move forward with their purchase at the commercial asking price before a decision was made on their grant application. These examples illustrate the importance of the SLF in community buy-outs.⁵⁰



Figure 11. February 2019 celebration of the Pyramid at Anderston entering community ownership utilising the 100th award given by the Scottish Land Fund (Image provided by the Pyramid at Anderston and used with permission)

While the positive impact of such government funding is evident in the number of successful community ventures enabled by it, some recommendations did emerge as I asked my informants to reflect on their experiences of winning this financial support. Several comments raised concerns about a possible government emphasis on supporting purchases while neglecting foundational support to ensure these new community initiatives have a healthy start. ‘Being given the money to buy is only the first stage,’ as one Action Party member explained. ‘The running costs, post-acquisition development costs, and general upkeep seem to be forgotten in the equation.’ He described how there was ‘a lack of

⁵⁰ According to Scottish Land Fund documentation, other groups have utilised their funding to purchase churches for community use. These include: Barmulloch Community Development Company (SC036648) in Glasgow to purchase the former All Saints Church and manse; Bruntsfield St. Oswalds Ltd (SC050913) in Edinburgh to purchase the former St Oswald’s church and hall; Clachan Village Hall (Kintyre) SCIO (SC050324) in Argyll & Bute to purchase the former Kilcalmonell Free Church; Grimsay Community Association (SC045009) in Eilean Siar to purchase the former Grimsay Free Church and Mission House; and Kilmaronock Old Kirk Trust (SC047874) in West Dunbartonshire to purchase the former Kilmaronock Church and adjacent property (Scottish Land Fund 2021).

financial support to set the business up and running.’ Another went into more detail on this gap in support and its impact on Bellfield’s early days.

They [Scottish Government] didn't give us the 600,000 in our hand but they gave it over to somebody else [the Scottish Land Fund] so that we could get the keys to this place. And then they didn't give us enough money to run it for 2 years. I don't expect them to give us money to run it forever, but if the government had just said, 'Right, we'll give you a cushion of two years,' we could've saved a lot of sweat and tears while we got things running. Our one poor staff member was so swamped doing day-to-day operations that she couldn't devote much time to looking for grants and developing Bellfield beyond the minimum of getting the doors open. Those early days are so important because you're establishing your policies and really setting the foundation. I think we'd be in a better spot now if we had some initial support.

It could be argued that additional grants might be sought to fund important early development costs, however, the effort required from often inexperienced volunteers to complete and submit funding applications was also raised as a point of concern.

As one Action Party trustee described, ‘the entire board have spent a lot of time filling out forms in hopes of securing funding, and a lot of times it's for naught.’ In a conversation with several trustees from Clachan Lochbroom Heritage Trust, they discussed the task of compiling a list of various funding sources to cover their early needs, from repair works to a feasibility study, memorial maintenance, and the installation of Clachan’s first toilets. Despite how weary she had seemed while discussing the topic, as the conversation came to a close one trustee sighed and smiled. ‘But we're willing to do it all because it's worth it.’ As established throughout this chapter, such financial support for communities is still relatively recent and continually evolving, and it is hoped that experiences like those above will be considered in improving options and outcomes for other groups.

In addition to applying for grants, there are also considerable fundraising efforts within the community itself. Beyond the obvious financial value of such activities, these efforts ‘help build community and cohesion’ by bringing people together for a common cause, according to one Action Party trustee. These activities can also positively impact other local organisations and causes. The members of CLHT had many creative examples of how they raised £30,000 for Clachan Church, as described during their first AGM in September 2018.

Fundraising has been of various kinds. There have been those very charming [donation] boxes that you see in the shops in Ullapool that were arranged with The Men's Shed to make.⁵¹ We're very grateful to The Men's Shed because the charm of the boxes themselves does absolutely attract interest and attract funds, so they have been quite successful. There's been sponsored events. There's been the cycle ride recently. Then Donnie Mackenzie who walked across the River Forth on the bridge. That was very successful. So there's been fundraising events of that kind. There was a Christmas fair and [a local artist's] cards were very successful.

These activities demonstrate a generative power beyond attracting donations, as they collaborated with another local charity, drew media attention through the efforts of volunteers undertaking sponsored events, and supported a local artist who created custom images of Clachan Church for sale. In a more modern take on fundraising, Action Party turned to a crowdfunding website to raise nearly £20,000 in 35 days. This discussion recalls the earlier example of the Isle of Gigha, where 'In true Gigha style, the islanders rose to the challenge and the funds were raised by the community' (Isle of Gigha Heritage Trust n.d.).

3.4. The Scottish approach in context

This section considers the movement for land reform and community ownership within an international context, as 'internationally, land reform in Scotland is considered unusual in its emphasis on community land ownership. Most other land reforms have focused on giving ownership rights to individuals and tenants' (Reid 2019). Before this, however, I will briefly address recent legislative developments not included in previous discussions, as these further demonstrate the Scottish approach. After the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015, the Scottish Government enacted the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2016. Reid provides the following summary of reforms this initiated.

Required the Scottish Government to prepare and publish a Land Rights and Responsibilities Statement.

Established the Scottish Land Commission, which is required to "have regard to" the Land Rights and Responsibilities Statement.

⁵¹ 'Men's Sheds respond to men's need for camaraderie and provide opportunities to work together in a way that contributes meaning to their lives and their communities' (Scottish Men's Sheds Association 2016). Scottish Charity Number SC045139. There are chapters located throughout the country, including Ullapool. A photo of one of these donation boxes is included in Chapter Five.

Required, by regulation, the development of a public register of controlling interests in land owners and tenants.

These regulations have been considered in draft by the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee, with the final regulations expected to be laid early in 2020.

Required the publication of Guidance on Engaging Communities in Decisions Relating to Land.

Introduced a right to buy land to further sustainable development; a consultation on this closed in September 2019 (2019).

These continued developments can be seen as fulfilling the words of Paul Wheelhouse, former Minister for Environment and Climate Change, in his forward to the 2014 report by the Land Reform Review Group: 'The relationship between the land and the people of Scotland is fundamental to the wellbeing, economic success, environmental sustainability and social justice of Scotland and her communities' (Land Reform Review Group 2014: 7).

There has long been an 'imbalance of intensity' on the subject of land reform between Scotland and its southern neighbour. In England, discussions are 'more diffuse, feeding into a multitude of debates including on enclosure, commons, game, housing and conservation', as opposed to the Scottish emphasis on 'the nature and conditions of tenure, protections and land redistribution' (Evans et al. 2022: 1). However, Evans notes a lack of comparative or regionally encompassing work beyond Cragoe and Readman's *The Land Question in Britain, 1750-1950* in 2010 and Howell's article 'The land question in nineteenth-century Wales, Ireland and Scotland: a comparative study' in 2013, with a particular lack of work considering the dramatic evolution of policies post-devolution (2022: 19). There have been some recent developments in England, notably the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, which facilitates public use of 'open access land', and the Localism Act 2011.

The Localism Act is significant for this discussion as its overall aim of de-centralising authority and reverting powers to more local institutions included the creation of a mechanism similar to Community Right to Buy called Community Right to Bid (Morford 2015).

Assets of community value can be nominated by parish councils or by groups with a connection with the community. If the nomination is accepted, local groups will be given time to come up with a bid for the asset if and when it is sold. These provisions are also known as the 'community right to bid' (Sandford 2022: 6).

The main difference here is that with the right to bid, no protected priority is given to the community's bid, and it remains entirely at the seller's discretion whether they will choose to accept it (Sandford 2022: 6). As Morford summarises in her comparison of recent legislation from the two countries, 'important as these measures are, they are not as bold as the Scottish reforms: the access rights are not quite as liberal, while the community right is simply a right to bid, not a right of first refusal' (2015; see also: Slade 2007).

Looking further afield, Danson and Burnett provide a comparative analysis of Scottish and European developments in land ownership to explain how, 'in contrast to the promotion of owner-occupancy in Denmark and Ireland for instance, or de-collectivization of state farms in central and eastern Europe' Scotland has developed a unique emphasis on community ownership (2021: 283; see also: Swinnen 2002; Hartvigsen 2013; Hoffman 2013). This is a direct result of the positive climate create by the successful 'trailblazers' described earlier, which continues to influence a growing body of legislation. There is also the 'unusual strategy' in Scotland of maintaining original proportions of estates when transferring to community ownership, as opposed to the prevailing trend of fragmentation into smaller parcels elsewhere in Europe (Hoffman 2013: 289). This reflects an approach to land reform that attempts to 'expand the degree of local, democratic control over how land is used' rather than 'shift landholdings about' (ibid.: 296). As the emphasis of land reform in much of Europe has been on increasing private ownership, it does not enter into discourse on community ownership to nearly the same degree that the Scottish experience does (Danson and Burnett 2021: 287).

Due to its intrinsic connection to issues of environmental sustainability and community empowerment, land reform in Scotland is raised in wider discussions of renewable energy (Gubbins 2007; Warren 2009; Warren & McFayden 2010; McHarg 2015), land rights of indigenous and marginalised peoples (Hunter 2014), and various natural landscape management sectors (Lawrence 2022). This broad interest in Scotland's answer to its 'land question' even reached Action Party, who were the subject of an article in *Montana Law Review* that presented the following conclusion.

Scotland is a fascinating case study for contemporary land reform law, with all of the associated theoretical, sustainable development, and takings-related issues that such reform entails. Within Scotland, there are several fascinating individual case studies. Portobello is but one of them (Lovett and Combe 2019: 228).

As other community buy-outs presented throughout this chapter have demonstrated, there are indeed a number of examples already, and with the current trend of legislation and funding aimed at facilitating these activities, they will likely continue to increase.

3.4. Discussion

This chapter aimed not only to present Scotland's unique approach to land reform and its impact on community ownership, but to centre this discussion on the experiences of people actually involved in such projects. This offers unique insights into the complex realities my informants are working within when taking ownership of former churches. At the end of 2020, the Scottish Government reported that 422 community groups owned 612 places across the country. Of these, 87% were acquired after 2000 as part of the strong upward trend described throughout this chapter (Rural & Environmental Science 2021: 3). An understanding of what it means to establish one of these community groups, like Action Party at Bellfield or Clachan Lochbroom Heritage Trust at Clachan Church, provides a foundation for the following chapters dedicated to these respective case studies.

Chapter 4. Case study 1: Bellfield



Figure 12. Bellfield in the spring of 2019 (Photo by author)

4.1. 'How changed the scene!': A history of Portobello Old Parish Church

The first case study I discuss is the community hub of Bellfield, pictured above, which opened in 2018 after a community buy-out of the former Portobello Old Parish Church. This chapter begins with the historical development of the church and its surrounding community, establishing this as a place of continual evolution and change reflecting the character and needs of the surrounding area it was built to serve. As anthropologist Bruno Latour wrote in a foray into architectural theory with Alben Yaneva, a building can be understood 'as flight, as movement, as a series of transformations' (2008: 80). Bellfield's origins can be traced to 18 July 1807, when five local men met to discuss establishing a

preaching station affiliated with the Church of Scotland for the 800 residents of the seaside village of Portobello (Baird 1898: 320; Cavaye 1959: 3).⁵²

Situated east of Edinburgh on the Firth of Forth, the village of Portobello was originally served by Duddingston Kirk, which required residents to travel several miles to worship. After the successful meeting in 1807, services in Portobello were briefly held in a barn until a prominent area landowner, the Marquis of Abercorn, offered a parcel of farmland known as Rabbit Hall for the construction of Portobello’s first ‘Ecclesiastical Edifice’ (Baird 1898: 343).⁵³ An excerpt from a 1766 map presented below, while not quite contemporary with these events, shows Portobello to the east in relation to Edinburgh and Duddingston Kirk, the latter marked by an ‘x’ near the body of water at the bottom centre of the image. The map also indicates the rural nature of the area at the time, though this had developed to support a village by 1807.



Figure 13. Excerpt of “Plan of Edinburgh and places adjacent from an actual survey” by John Laurie in 1766 (Reproduced with the permission of the National Library of Scotland)

⁵² Preaching stations are locations where services may be held but which do not have the same formal governing structures or boundaries as official churches. In a collection of writings published posthumously in 1857, theologian Thomas Chalmers describes them as ‘the germ of the future church’ and advised that an area looking to establish a parish church first set up a preaching station and gauge its success (1857: 303).

⁵³ The area was known for an abundance of rabbits that burrowed in the sandy ground. Baird describes the area as home to dairy farms that, ‘with their white-washed and red-tiled buildings, lay between the highway and the sea, forming rather picturesque features in the landscape’ (1898: 310).

The charters transferring this farmland from the Marquis of Abercorn were given to subscribers of the nascent church, who would have been area residents (Cavaye 1959: 3).⁵⁴ Funding for construction would have also come from the surrounding community, as the executive director of Historic Churches Scotland described in an interview, saying that ‘these buildings originally were built by their communities with funds from the community, from individual landowners’. This situation illustrates why some individuals I spoke with feel that many churches have always belonged to their surrounding communities, not the Kirk authority based in Edinburgh. Consequently, they object to community bodies having to ostensibly pay for these properties again. ‘Since the community had to raise the money and pay for it when it was built, we’ve already paid for it,’ as one current Portobello resident explained regarding the parish church. The original subscribers may have long since departed, but the surrounding community’s sense of ownership and inheritance endures.

Returning to the construction of the church on this land, the first foundation stone was laid on 27 October 1808 amidst much celebration.

The procession of Freemasons, emerging from the then new Portobello Lodge, paraded along the beach (there being then no promenade) and thence up Melville Street to join the Chapel subscribers and a great assemblage of gentlemen. During the ceremony a Band of Singers sang appropriate anthems, and into the foundation stone was placed a crystal bottle containing documents, coins and records, and an engraved plate... Oil, wine and corn were poured onto the stone, whereupon it was sealed, with a blessing pronounced on the work now begun (Cavaye 1959: 4).

Though covered by a blackened patina, the stone described in the above history is still visible today, immediately to the right of the main doors at ground level, marked by a carving of a horizontal line from which stylised sun rays descend.⁵⁵ This original building of blonde ashlar sandstone was designed by Edinburgh architect William Sibbald and had a rectangular plan with an apse to the west, as portrayed below in an excerpt from an 1824 survey. Upon its opening in 1810, the building looked considerably different from the local landmark of today, pictured at the start of this chapter as Bellfield in the spring of 2019.

⁵⁴ At the time, members of the church paid seat rents and were thus ‘subscribed’ to the church (Brown 1987).

⁵⁵ This stone was also described in 1959 as being in the same location: ‘in the North-East corner of the church, facing the street’ (Cavaye 1959: 3).

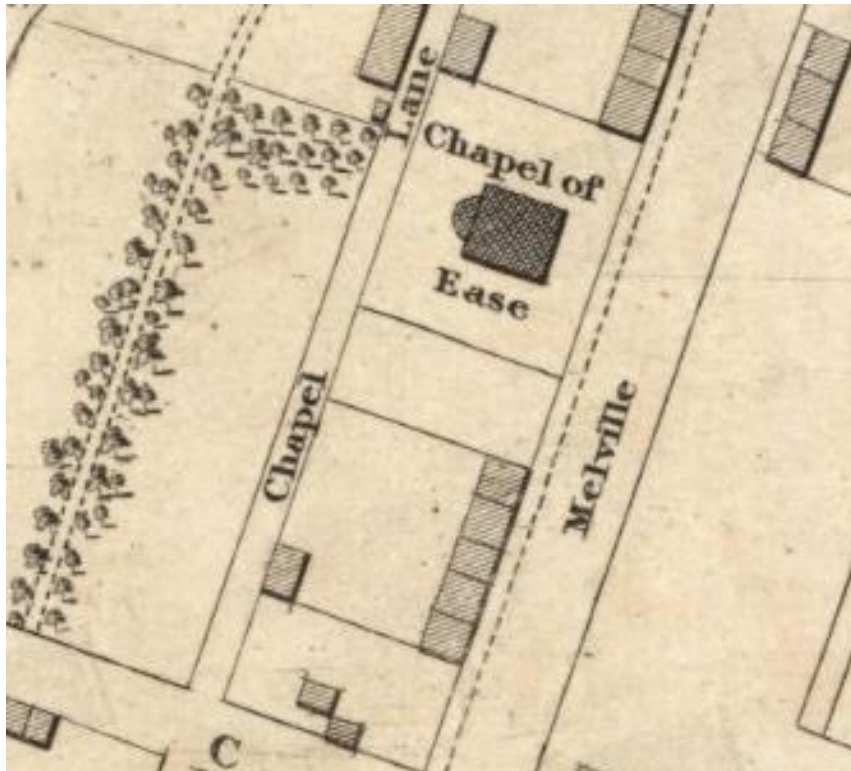


Figure 14. Excerpt from “Plan of the Town of Portobello from actual survey” by John Wood in 1824. Notably, at this time the street in front of the church was named Melville Street and it was bordered to the rear by Chapel Lane. These would change to Bellfield Street and Bellfield Lane at a later date (Reproduced with the permission of the National Library of Scotland)

Despite a period of debt in its early years, the church continued to grow and evolve (Cavaye 1959: 4). In 1818, it was upgraded from preaching station to chapel of ease. Such secondary churches were more formally recognised than preaching stations and were established when parish churches were deemed too far away or overcrowded to meet a population’s needs (Church of Scotland 2016: 1-2). By 1831, a census showed that the surrounding population had grown to 2,781 (“Report on the Burgh” 1832: 119). The status of the church was raised further in 1834 to that of a *quoad sacre* church, that being a parish church whose boundaries and functions are purely ecclesiastic rather than civil.⁵⁶ It was at this point that the kirkyard was established and a tall stone wall erected around the perimeter. A western extension and clock tower were constructed in 1839.

⁵⁶ At the time, parish boundaries also functioned as administrative units. These were divided into smaller *quoad sacre* parishes when the original parish became too populous for the original church, though for administrative purposes the original parish boundary was used (ScotlandsPeople n.d.).

After the Great Disruption of 1843, described in Chapter Two as a schism where a large portion the Church of Scotland’s leadership left to create the Free Church of Scotland, this young parish church was devastated by the loss of its minister and office-bearers. Its status was reverted to that of a chapel of ease as a result. It remained as such until 1861, when it became a *quoad sacra* parish church once again. Another extension, this time to the north, was added in 1879, and stained glass windows were installed in 1895. By this time, it was, in the opinion of one observer, ‘a plain edifice’ (Groome 1885: 219). An excerpt presented below from an 1893 town survey shows both the new shape of the building, noted as able to seat 1000, and the dense residential area that had grown around it.



Figure 15. Excerpt from the 1893 ordinance survey “Town Plan of Portobello” (Reproduced with the permission of the National Library of Scotland)

By the late 19th century, the surrounding town had developed from a rural hamlet into a popular seaside resort with several resident industries (Baird 1898). Sand from the beach at the town’s eastern boundary and clay from beds along the Figgate Burn—a stream feeding into the Firth of Forth from the west—fuelled the rise of area glassworks, potteries, brickworks, and tileworks (National Library of Scotland 2022a). Meanwhile, proximity to the sea, two mineral springs, and enterprising local businesspeople made Portobello a fashionable spa and leisure destination, as seen below in a lively 1880 photo of the seaside (Baird 1898: 313-4. See also: Meckie 1999).



Figure 16. Portobello beach between 1860 and 1880 (©RCAHMS)

Portobello's changing fortunes were reflected in one observation from the time, where 'the sea still beats with angry roar or peaceful plash upon the beach, but instead of the unfenced downs, it is now bounded by a fashionable promenade and elegant villas' (Baird 1898: 310). In 1896, the Burgh Reform Act joined Portobello with the neighbouring capital. It was 'not from any want of natural ability that Portobello had united her destinies to Edinburgh', but rather a consequence of their proximity that 'rendered it desirable that they should unite their forces' for the common good of their residents (ibid.: 433). Reflecting on a century and a half of development led one historian at the time to declare, 'How changed the scene!' (ibid.)

Now part of the capital city, this bustling seaside community 'was in its heyday' in the early 20th century, and the parish church also continued to evolve throughout this dynamic new era (City of Edinburgh Council 2000: 9). The first of several name changes occurred in June 1930, following the union of the United Free Church with the Church of Scotland, when Portobello Parish Church became Portobello Old Parish Church to distinguish it from former United Free churches in the area. Two other area congregations were merged into the parish church over the following decades. The first merger occurred in 1954, after which the parish church became Portobello Old and Regent Street Parish

Church. The other church involved was the product of the complex ecclesiastical history discussed in Chapter Two, moving between five denominations before finally becoming property of the Kirk and being converted into a community venue called Thomson Hall. It survived less than 50 years as such before it was demolished and replaced with housing. The second merger occurred in 1973, creating Portobello Old and Windsor Place Church. The name was reverted back to Portobello Old Parish Church in 1999 (National Records of Scotland 2022).

In a piece written for the church's 150th anniversary celebration in 1959, from which much of the preceding historical information was gathered, Stanley Cavaye presents his own analysis of the history of the church until that point.

It will be seen from the foregoing that many different streams of Scottish ecclesiastical history and tradition converge in our Church, and that we have, indeed, a rich and varied heritage, of which we may well be proud. But we do not look only to the past: still less do we live in the past.

Reverend J.D. Brown's foreword to that report expands on the theme of looking to the future.

Let us, by all means, look back upon the past. But do not let us dwell in the past. Let us, rather, looking back, receive all the guidance and inspiration that the past can give, in order that we may meet more bravely and faithfully the demands of the present, and then let us look forward confidently and hopefully to the future...

Reverend Brown departed to oversee another parish in 1963, one year before the sizeable addition of church halls over land reclaimed from the kirkyard. The issue of graves at Portobello Old Parish Church was raised in Chapter Two, but I will reiterate here that no one I encountered knew how or where these graves were relocated, and I found no answers in church records from this time held by the National Records of Scotland. What is known is that some gravestones were moved to the boundary wall or set against the building, with only a few left standing in the resulting green space. The large L shaped addition of two halls was the final addition to the church. The diagram on the next page presents this final form and the dates of additions described throughout this section. It is followed by a floor plan of the church, with an updated version of Bellfield provided later in the chapter.

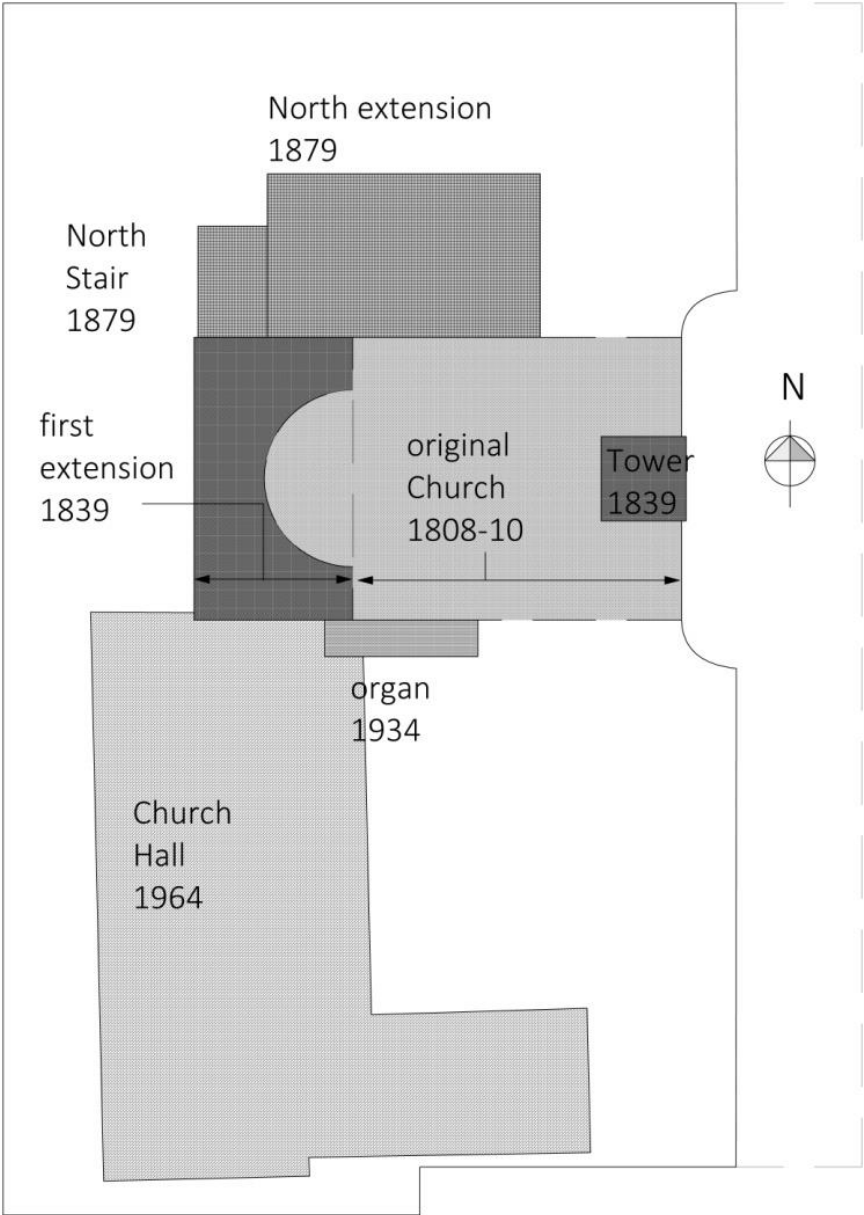


Figure 17. Diagram of the church’s development over time (Provided by Action Party and used with permission)

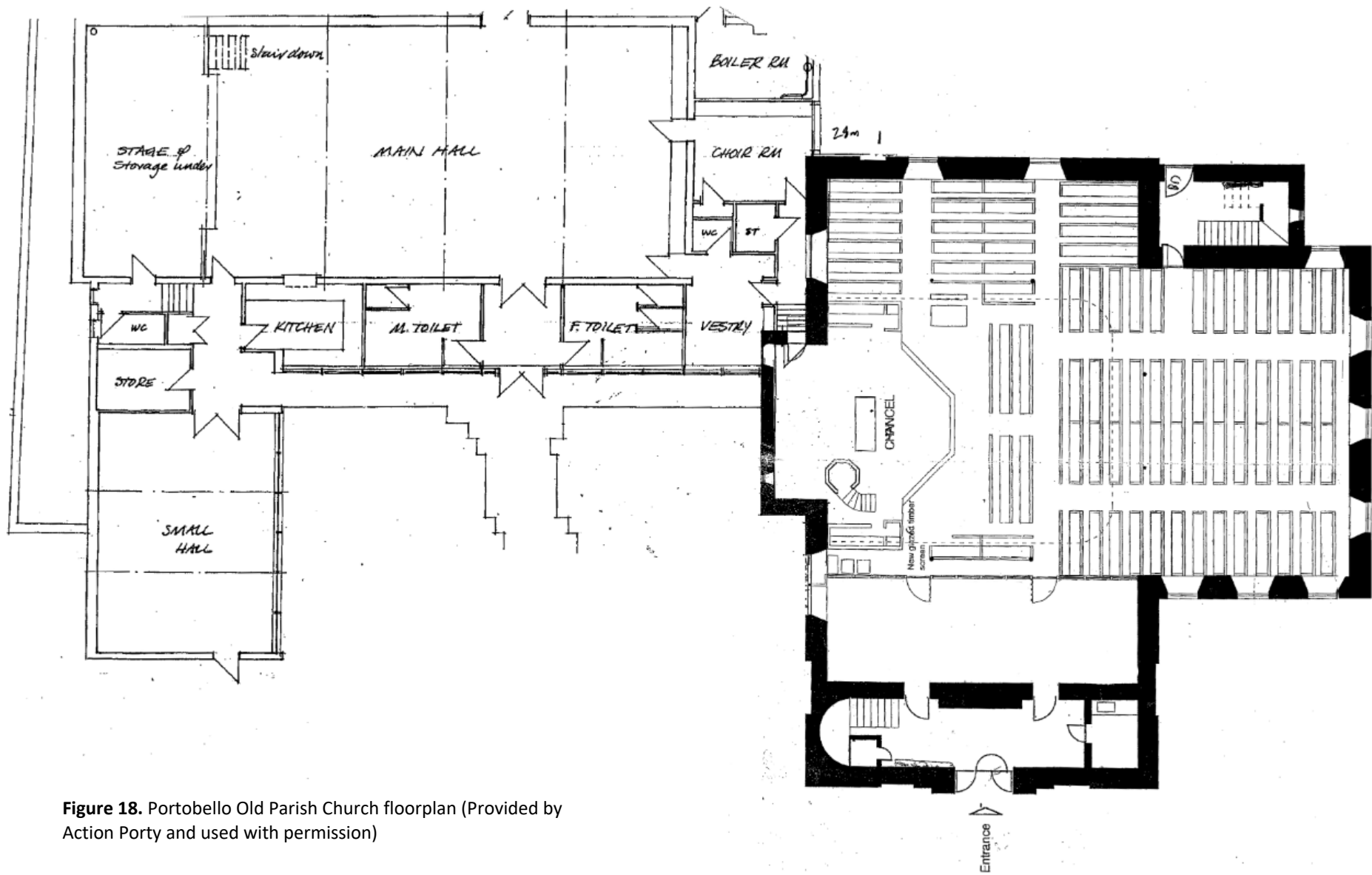


Figure 18. Portobello Old Parish Church floorplan (Provided by Action Party and used with permission)

Like many seaside resort towns in the second half of the 20th century, Portobello entered a period of decline as industries closed or relocated and its popularity waned (see Hill 1997; Portobello Heritage Trust n.d.).⁵⁷ Industrial activity in the area negatively impacted the natural resources that had driven its popularity. The mineral springs were destroyed, one by the construction of a gasometer and the other by the installation of a pump on a nearby stream to serve coal pits and the expansion of the promenade (Baird 1898: 314). As one long-time resident recalled in an interview, 'The bottle factory needed sand to make the glass, so they just took it', eventually decimating the beach to the point where 'there used to be a 16 foot drop from the prom[enade] to the beach.'⁵⁸ A study by the Hydraulics Research Station of the now-dissolved Department of Scientific and Industrial Research found that this resulted in damage to the sea wall and flooding (Newman 1974: 1389). According to one man, as lovely as many aspects of the town still were by the late 1970s, the sea was unclean, a number of buildings had fallen derelict, and crime and antisocial activity kept it 'feeling a bit rough around the edges'.

Considering more recent history, one resident recalled how he had relocated to the area '30 years ago, and at that time house prices in Portobello were well below the Edinburgh average. It has really changed since that time.' He described how there was 'a lot of semi-derelict property and rent was cheap. This attracted artists and cultural people, and that changed the dynamic of Portobello. So it's a vibrant community in terms of its groups and organisations', which has fuelled its resurgence in popularity. Local media coverage of the suburb's growth is common, as people are increasingly drawn to what one article describes as the 'sand, sea and a strong wave of community spirit'.

And the great rush to Porty is set to continue, with nearly 2,500 homes lined up on land in and around the suburb - transforming the community forever. Developers have lodged planning applications for a raft of sites, bidding to cash in on daunting house-building targets. Though while widespread acceptance of the need for more housing exists, so do fears for already under-pressure GP surgeries, schools and roads (Edinburgh Evening News 2019).

⁵⁷ Proposed explanations for the decline of seaside resort towns include the availability of affordable international travel and a lack of government investment. For more on these towns, their decline, and case studies, see: Durie 1997; Walton 2000; Gale 2005; Girling 2007; Farr 2017; Jarratt 2019.

⁵⁸ This interviewee went on to explain that the destruction of the beach was eventually reversed. 'They [unknown] dredged the harbour at Musselburgh and piped the sand back. Don't know how much it cost. They decided it was worth it, and I'm glad they did.' This operation occurred in 1972 (Newman 1974: 1392).

This introduces two important facets of contemporary Portobello I will address throughout the remainder of this section and in my upcoming discussion of the buy-out of the parish church: community activity and concern over insufficient amenities.

A sense of collective initiative and agency is considered by some to be a defining feature of the local identity. ‘There’s always been a drive within this community, of fairness and making it right,’ one woman recalled with a proud smile during an interview. ‘It’s always had a sense of, “Something needs to happen? Well, let’s just get it happening then!”’ She described how such efforts saved the Victorian Portobello Swim Centre from closure in 1996 (see: Campbell 2021), converted the Portobello Wash House into a community centre in 1979 and kept it open ever since (see: The Wash House n.d.), and created one the UK’s longest running childcare organisations in 1929 (see: Portobello Toddlers Hut 2023).⁵⁹ The Chair of the Academy of Urbanism also credited this local spirit as making Portobello the top neighbourhood in the UK and Ireland at the 2020 Urbanism Awards. ‘Portobello is Edinburgh’s sea front and could so easily be another slightly run-down resort were it not for the energy and strength of the local community’ (Edinburgh Evening News 2019).

The parish church, meanwhile, experienced a decline in membership while still regularly hosting events and activities for the surrounding community. Whilst regular worship attendance was in decline, ‘the parish church was still a very busy place’, according to one individual who regularly held classes on the premises both before and after the community buy-out. The church hosted generations of celebrations, meetings, and classes for all ages, thanks largely to its two halls, which include a kitchen, toilets, and stage. Like many churches seeking to raise funds, provide socialising opportunities for groups such as new mothers and isolated elderly people, or facilitate other community benefits, it also ran a small café.⁶⁰ The church was a fixture for the surrounding community—‘a stable presence’, as one woman described it while we sat at a nearby café discussing her history of hiring one of the halls to host a class. ‘You viewed it as your church, even if you didn’t ever go to

⁵⁹ Other notable examples of community initiatives include PEDAL, established in 2005 ‘to create a vibrant, sustainable Portobello which can help combat climate change and reduce fossil fuel use through a process of re-localisation’ (PEDAL 2018); the opening of co-working and event space Tribe Party in 2015 (Tribe Party 2019); and the Portobello Campaign Against the Superstore, a groundswell of opposition in 2003 to the redevelopment of a former Scottish Power site to a superstore that campaigners argued would threaten local businesses (The Portobello Reporter 2003: 1).

⁶⁰ According to one Edinburgh minister I interviewed, examples of other CofS churches with café initiatives include Polwarth Parish Church and Fairmilehead Parish Church in Edinburgh, and Dennistoun New Parish Church in Glasgow.

services.’ As she sat with her thoughts for another moment, she suddenly grinned sheepishly. ‘And I suppose that was part of the problem, and why it ended up closing.’

Chapter Two established a trend amongst Church of Scotland churches where shrinking and aging congregations eventually necessitate the closure of buildings that are too large, no longer meet their needs, or require maintenance beyond their abilities, and this was ultimately the case here as well. The nearby churches of St James and St Philip’s were in similar states of membership decline. In 2014, these three congregations made what a member of St James described as the ‘difficult and emotional’ decision to merge into one new church, thus rendering two buildings surplus to requirements (St James 2014). ‘There was such trauma in the [old parish] church over which buildings would be lost and which would be kept,’ a Bellfield volunteer explained. Ultimately, the Gothic Revival style St Philip’s, several blocks to the east towards the neighbouring suburb of Joppa, was chosen to be home for the newly formed Portobello and Joppa Parish Church. A more detailed overview of the church closure process is provided in Chapter Two, so this section will conclude with a brief discussion of the experience of closure at Portobello Old Parish Church.

Despite the official perspective of the Kirk towards its built legacy, presented in Chapter Two as grounded in a theological understanding of a church as its people and not the material structures they use, the closure of a place of worship can still be a traumatic event. This was evident in the recollections of one woman on the final months of the parish church in the summer of 2014.

For a lot of people, they had invested not only their money but their time, and they really were very aggrieved. They had kept it, not just clean and tidy, but they'd gone down and polished it, they'd arranged when it needed painting. People were aggrieved, without a doubt, and were very sad to leave buildings that they're very familiar with. They knew every nook and cranny of it, and those were stuffed with memories of events and people still here and long gone.

As discussed previously, members of a congregation are more distressed by the loss of embodied and material connections to memories than the loss or misuse of places perceived as sacred. Looking back on the merger, one long-time resident and active member of a nearby CofS congregation concluded that, ‘after the initial sting of losing the building, a lot of people who were members here have gone along and integrated quite

well.’ The next section proceeds to focus on the landmark community buy-out campaign sparked by the closure of Portobello Old Parish Church and the subsequent creation of Bellfield as ‘a place to belong’.⁶¹

4.2. The community buy-out

The recent purchase of the former Parish Church by Action Party is emblematic of the current resurgence of Portobello after a long period of relative decline from its resort heyday and shows once again how this building reflects the development and status of Portobello.

–John Renshaw Architects 2017: 2

‘Crucial community spaces are vanishing,’ declared *The Portobello Reporter*, an independent local newspaper, in the summer of 2016. By then, the campaign to bring the old parish church into community ownership was developing strong support as an opportunity to protect the long-time local amenity.⁶² This section looks at the origins of this movement, the creation of Action Party, and the opening of Bellfield as ‘a community hub, providing affordable meeting and activity space... a high-quality arts and social venue, offering opportunities to mark life events including weddings; providing a welcome to all in its gardens and potentially café facilities; and be a place to share Portobello’s history and map its future’ (Cameron 2019: 6-7).

In an analogue of the first meeting some 200 years earlier, approximately half a dozen concerned area residents met at a local cafe in March 2016 to discuss what could be done about the upcoming sale of the now-closed parish church. One of these attendees later recalled how ‘we all felt that another market sale of a key building in our community would be likely to leave us further depleted of facilities where the community could meet, play, connect and thrive. Surely there was a way we could step forward and challenge this seemingly inevitable process?’ (Cameron 2019: 2). These individuals brought varied professional skillsets and personal experiences that lent themselves to community organising and navigating legal processes, and their early engagement is credited as providing the driving force behind the project (ibid.: 3).⁶³

⁶¹ This is the official Bellfield motto.

⁶² For local reporting on the campaign, see: Edinburgh Evening News 2016; Swanson 2016; The Herald 2017; Swanson 2017.

⁶³ Chapter Three presents the importance of such human resources and social capital to a community buy-out.

This dynamic initial group organised a public meeting shortly thereafter in April 2016 to discuss a proposed buy-out. One interviewee described this meeting as being so well attended that it was ‘standing room only’. Following from this successful meeting, the Friends of Bellfield—the predecessor of Action Party—was created to ‘try to acquire, develop and run the church and halls on behalf of the Portobello community’ (Urban Animation 2016: 6).⁶⁴ This was the start of the Save Bellfield campaign, which utilised social media, door-to-door outreach, media attention, and events to raise funds and awareness (ibid.).⁶⁵

When I asked current volunteers and trustees why they became involved, they expressed a unanimous desire to protect and expand upon local amenities the former church had long provided—suitable spaces where people could hold gatherings and events, from school concerts to birthday parties, Pilates classes, and assemblies for significant life events regardless of religious affiliation. Only one of these individuals was affiliated with the Church of Scotland, though not the former congregation here, while several others belonged to other denominations and the majority expressed no religious affiliation at all. They unanimously expressed concerns for the shrinking of local amenities in the growing Edinburgh suburb.

This is an expanding community, yet there's a diminishing of social amenity space. We've lost St James [another CofS church] with two halls; the bingo hall has closed; an old Scottish Power building that was used for about 7-8 years for all sorts of community ventures with businesses and stuff was closed and demolished. Then there was the threat of this church closing and its two halls going away. You just think ‘Well, where are people going to go?’ It's very well and good to go on building houses, but if you want to create a *place*, where are people going have their kids' parties and go to meetings and all that? For me it was always about saying, ‘The population is growing, and we should welcome that new population, but at the same time if we want to maintain Portobello as a good place to live it's got to have local facilities as well.’

⁶⁴ A Friends Group is a charity made of volunteers with a shared interest, often in caring for or supporting a particular place owned by another entity. For example, there are Friends Groups for churches (National Churches Trust), parks and green spaces (Wild Ideas), and historic buildings (Friends of Duff House).

⁶⁵ The Friends set up a stand during the 2016 Portobello Big Beach Busk, an annual summer music event along the nearby promenade, to gather opinions on potential uses for the former church. A well-attended cabaret event in June 2016 was also organised to raise funds and awareness.

In addition to the examples given above, the Portobello Community Centre (The Wash House) is reportedly 'full to capacity' and the Town Hall abruptly closed near the end of my fieldwork period (Urban Animation 2016: 5).⁶⁶

According to an appraisal of the proposed buy-out, 'concerns over the ongoing loss of space for community use led to the formation of the Friends of Bellfield group and their proposal to bring the Old Parish Church into community ownership and use' (Urban Animation 2016: 5). This emphasis on safeguarding community use is seen across their campaign materials and reflected in collaborative products created at public meetings, where people had the opportunity to voice their opinions on the future of the site. Examples of these materials are presented over the following three pages, beginning with a poster advertising the first public meeting.



Figure 19. Poster advertising a public meeting to discuss options for keeping the church 'in community hands for community use' (Provided by Action Party and used with permission)

⁶⁶ The sudden closure of Portobello Town Hall left event organisers searching for new spaces to use. Many turned to Bellfield, however, there was not space to accommodate any of those activities. After the success of Bellfield, the community is attempting to purchase the Town Hall through a new organisation.



SAVE BELLFIELD

The Old Parish Church complex on Bellfield Street has been at the heart of Portobello life for over 200 years and has provided a focus for the community to come together, celebrate landmark occasions, be entertained, find support and advice, learn new skills and much more.

The Church of Scotland has now amalgamated the three parishes in the area. They are now regrettably selling the Old Parish Church complex.

We believe this sale would be heartfelt loss to the community, resulting in local groups losing these facilities, with little chance of finding alternative accommodation within the area.

The Save Bellfield Campaign is proposing that the Bellfield Complex is bought for the community to keep the facilities open as a vital local resource.

 SAVE Bellfield  friendsofbellfield@gmail.com  [web: bellfield.scot](http://web:bellfield.scot)

Figure 20. 'Save Bellfield' flyer explaining the motivation of the community buy-out as maintaining a community asset (Provided by Action Party and used with permission)

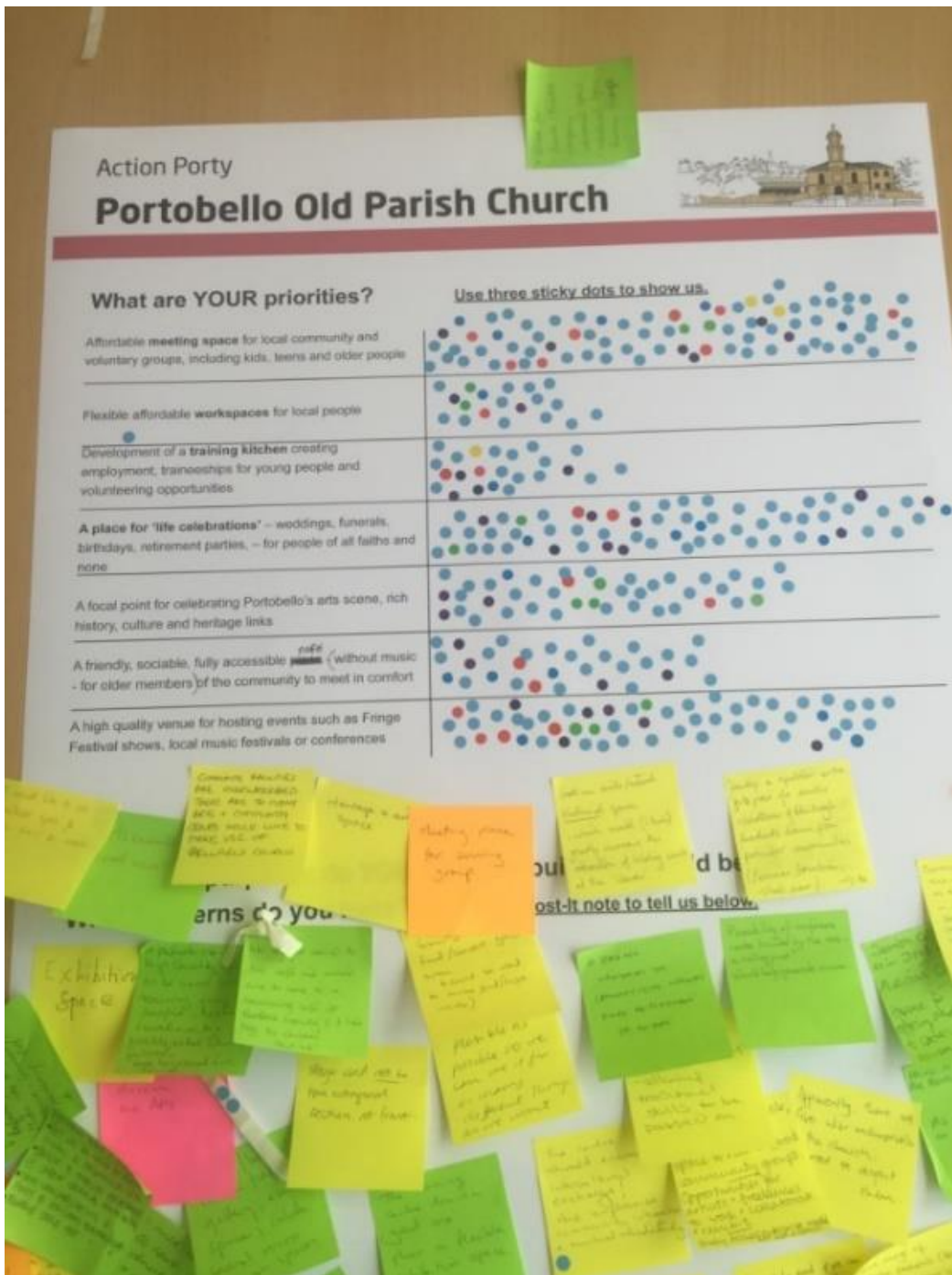


Figure 21. Collaborative poster at a public meeting. People indicated their priorities amongst pre-defined options, with ‘affordable meeting space for local community and voluntary groups, including kids, teens and older people’ as the top choice. This was followed, in order, by: spaces for ‘life celebrations’ like weddings and birthday parties; suitable spaces for hosting music festivals/performances and conferences; a ‘focal point’ for the local art scene and heritage; an accessible café space; a training kitchen; and the option with the least interest was workspaces. People also left additional ideas on sticky notes (Provided by Action Party and used with permission)

Another dimension of protecting community amenity that emerged in my discussions with those involved was distrust towards property developers, whom people suspected would use the former church for their own gain whilst disregarding the needs and desires of the surrounding community. St James, the other area church closed during the merger, was redeveloped into five luxury townhouses, and one interviewee recalled how at least one housing developer expressed interest in the parish church, making this a very real concern for the buy-out campaign (London Edinburgh Holdings 2023). ‘These gathering spaces are precious and a developer wouldn’t run the building in the way we are,’ one trustee explained, referring to the new use as a community hub. ‘It would’ve become lovely fancy modern houses. Tastefully done, yet too expensive for any of us local folk. But nobody builds community halls anymore. So you’ve got to save these important spaces you have.’

As I described earlier, those involved in the buy-out were from outside the former congregation or the Church of Scotland entirely, though many had used the church as a community space for years. Consequently, the question naturally arises as to how the former worshipping community felt about the proposed buy-out. ‘I think that the local church, the local people were very supportive and generally have been,’ as one trustee reflected. ‘The key holder would let us in or let our architects in. So they were quite supportive.’ This aligned with what I was told by several individuals from within the CofS whom I met over the course of my fieldwork. Put simply, if the church could not go to another religious group, then community use was the closest continuation of its long role as a local gathering place.

However, just as in my other case study at Clachan Church, members of the former congregation were not particularly involved in the buy-out campaign itself or subsequent reuse of the church. This decision not to be involved was described at Clachan Church as making a ‘clean break’ with the building to help its loss ‘hurt less’. Still, this dynamic should not be extrapolated to all such reuse projects or worshipping communities. For example, members of the former church have been central in the creation of Glasgow’s Pyramid at Anderston community centre in the former Anderston and Kelvingrove Parish Church. In the case of Bellfield, the consensus is that people are ‘happy it’s being used and loved by the community’, according to one former congregant.

The sale of the church was handled by the General Trustees of the Church of Scotland rather than the congregation itself, following the policy described in Chapter Two. Consequently, the prerogative of the General Trustees to obtain the full monetary value of properties in support of their worshipping communities and ongoing organisational mission took precedence. The Friends of Bellfield requested a delay on the sale of the building so they could focus on securing funding and consulting with the community, however, this request was denied. The Church of Scotland's stance on obtaining the full value of its properties can be a source of tension with communities, as some people feel that these buildings have always belonged both legally and emotionally to their surrounding communities and should thus be offered at reduced cost. This was the case when I asked one current volunteer why he thought the church should come into community ownership. 'It has always been in community ownership,' he replied. 'It already belonged to the community. Local residents paid for it to begin with.'

In some instances, the Kirk has sold buildings for a nominal £1 fee to heritage groups and local organisations. Such was the case for the Thomas Telford designed church in Ullapool, now a museum (Ullapool Museum 2022), and St Peter's Kirk in Orkney, now owned by Historic Churches Scotland and supported by a Friends Group (The Orkney News 2021). Though, as the executive director of Historic Churches Scotland explained, such cases were likely because the sites were not appraised at any considerable value. By contrast, Portobello Old Parish Church was appraised at approximately £600,000. In those cases, ostensibly giving the properties away did not cost the Kirk much in potential profits that could be reinvested into their organisation.

Undeterred by the rejection of their request for additional time, the Friends of Bellfield changed their name to Action Party and established a company limited by guarantee on 11 August 2016, creating a legal body capable of triggering the novel urban Community Right to Buy (CRtB) process (as presented in detail in Chapter Three) to counter an unwilling seller. Within three months, there were 339 members (Urban Animation 2016: 6). If approved, CRtB would recognise community interest in the property and grant them 12 months to secure funding to meet the approximately £600,000 value ascribed to the building. Looking back nearly two years later, one trustee summarised their daunting yet overall successful experience utilising this new legal mechanism.

We were always up against a clock, so that intensified the process. I thought by and large it wasn't too bad of an experience. We got a lot of support from the Scottish Government team. We were lucky in the sense that we were able to mobilise a lot of enthusiastic volunteers quite quickly and build up momentum... You go into this [CRtB] process, which is quite intensive, at the same time that you're trying to set up governance documents, register with Companies House, get charitable status. You're beginning to think about feasibility and business plans. You're then trying to do more community engagement in terms of what would people like to see here. So there's about 4 or 5 different strands, and it felt quite mad for a bunch of community volunteers to have to do. But we persevered and we're here today.

Their application was approved in the spring of 2017, making it the first successful application of an urban community buy-out under the new land reform legislation. Action Party are now recognised as 'trailblazers for other urban groups across Scotland' and have provided a blueprint for other aspiring projects (Swanson 2017). The purchase was made possible by £570,000 in funding won from the Scottish Land Fund, or 94% of the purchase price of the building, and the remaining amount was reached through a crowdfunding project (Swanson 2017; Cameron 2019: 7).⁶⁷

The keys to the old parish church were handed over on 6 September 2017 and work soon began on preparing the building for its reopening the following summer. Whilst some spaces only received a new coat of paint, others required more complex interventions to bring them up to current health and safety standard. No modifications requiring planning permission were made. As Chapter Two discusses, the church had been exempt from evolving health and safety regulations, but as a new legal entity Bellfield is now required to meet these standards, such as a new fire alarm system for the former sanctuary—now the Celebration Hall. The church foyer became the Celebration Foyer, the vestry the Front Garden Room, and the choir room the Back Garden Room. The following floor plan presents its six hireable spaces. The doors were reopened as Bellfield amidst much celebration on 23 June 2018. This chapter now moves on to the analysis of my fieldwork there, beginning with a retelling of my introduction to Bellfield and the people of Action Party.

⁶⁷ See Chapter Three for more on the Scottish Land Fund and the significance of this grant.

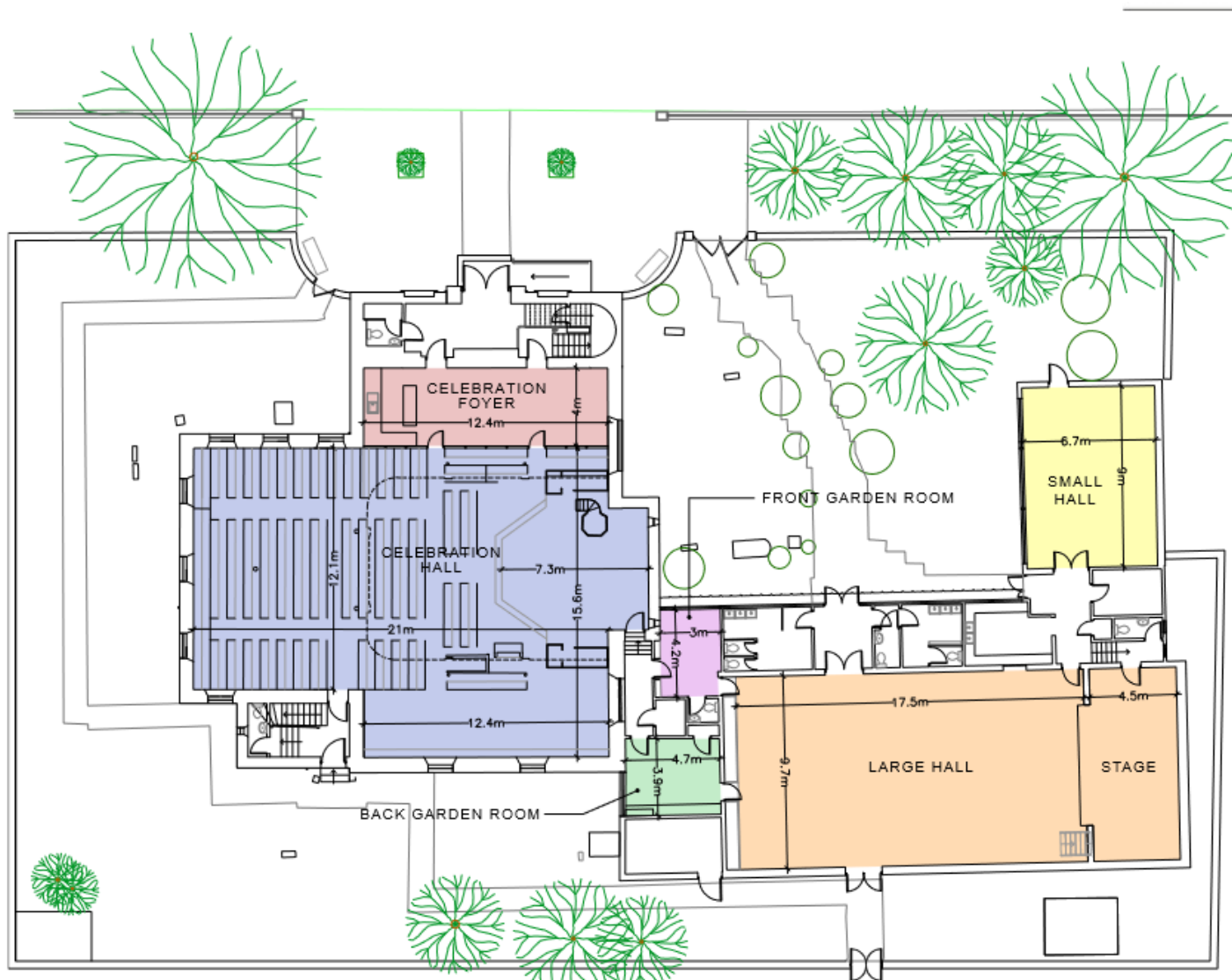


Figure 22. Bellfield floorplan indicating the six hirable spaces (Provided by Action Party and used with permission)

4.3. Bellfield

'I painted the doors,' Ellie said proudly when we first met in front of Bellfield's slate blue main doors. Like many Edinburgh residents, I had visited the nearby Portobello beach on a few temperate summer days, staying close to the promenade and never sparing much thought for the community that lived around the popular destination. We were on a quiet residential road between the high street and promenade, with neat rows of two-storey blonde sandstone homes on either side. While a few of these appeared somewhat recently cleaned and glowed tawny in the late afternoon light, most bore the uneven ashy patina characteristic of older sandstone buildings in the area. The former church in front of us—slightly set back from the road by a paved oblong forecourt—was no exception, the blackened stones testifying to its age and rootedness in the area.

'Actually,' she added after some thought, 'someone came and put a coat on after me. It didn't look very good, so I had to apply another coat, because people had seen me working on it earlier. It had my name on it and was this piece of me that I contributed.' Ellie gave the tall wooden door a companionable pat with one hand while the other brushed aside a small brass cover to reveal what I presumed to be the original keyhole. She used a large key for the mortise lock and pushed the door open.

'I never thought I'd be a keyholder of a church,' she said as we left the encroaching chill of late September and stepped into the foyer. Natural light entered from a wide fanlight over the main doors and a window above a set of stairs that curved up the wall to our left. Directly in front of us, beneath a wall still bearing the outlines of postings from the former church congregation, was a table covered with neat stacks of flyers, notices, and business cards advertising events and services held at Bellfield and around Portobello. The building was silent now, the lights off, but it was clearly a hub for diverse activities. Ellie walked to the far wall as I surveyed the flyers. 'Though... I guess I'm still not, since it's no longer a church!' She laughed and flipped several light switches, bringing the silent place alight. 'Let's begin our tour!'

My introduction to Bellfield was thus framed by the importance of physically engaging with the place as it transitioned from former church to community hub, as well as the ongoing work of navigating evolving identities and understandings of it. Examples like this repeatedly emerged throughout my fieldwork, leading to the overarching theme of this

chapter, that being how notions of Bellfield as a place are mediated through material encounters and engagements with the former church. This is supported by analyses of Bellfield as a 'place of memory', the impact of embodied engagements and performativity on both place and the people involved, and how the concept of 'secondhandedness'—wherein these new owners encounter the inherited nature of the former church—is experienced in this instance of adaptive reuse.

4.3.1. Place of memory

Just like the community around it, the place now known as Bellfield has continually evolved over its 200 year history—a history that remains present and influences the new use as a community hub. Considering how new owners interact with and experience this dimension of place offers valuable insights into how and why communities still value such former churches and the impact of memory culture on their conversions to new uses. The vast majority of those involved with Bellfield neither attended services when it was a church nor describe themselves as members of the Church of Scotland; their experiences of the mnemonic landscape here are thus unique from former congregants. This is said not for the sake of comparison but rather to emphasise the importance of understanding this common feature of non-religious church reuse in Scotland, where religiosity has been in decline since the mid-20th century (Brierley 2017: 1).

This section begins by introducing the concept of a 'mnemonic landscape' and establishes Bellfield as a 'place of memory', laying necessary conceptual groundwork for following discussions. I then consider emplaced social memory and how it generates a sense of connectedness and continuity, followed by an exploration of how memorials are a distinct material expression of memory culture, the influence of which Action Party must navigate as part of Bellfield's identity. This section ends with a discussion on the performative aspect of memory culture, using examples of textually mediated memory and commemorative events.

I will first clarify a few concepts and terms utilised in the following analyses regarding memory at Bellfield. As Sharon Macdonald explained in her work on heritage and identity in Europe, 'A major problem with memory as a category of analysis is its very ubiquity and capaciousness'; how it can refer to both the act of remembering and what is

remembered (2013: 10). The mnemonic landscape is thus a broad concept concerned with the nature of memory within a particular context. It can refer to a general 'memorial and memory culture', focusing on human experience and practices (Kuttenberg 2007: 469), or physical 'spaces of memory' (Bakshi 2017: 4). It can also be purely visual or textual in nature (Trigg 2013: 105). Considering the nature of this research, centred on the relationship between people and place, for my purposes the mnemonic landscape or landscape of memory encompasses both the subjective human and material nature of memory at Bellfield. It can be considered another dimension of place, where personal and collective social memories are anchored by, stored in, and erupt through the physicality of the former church. It is a landscape both abstract and material; a contested and ever-evolving plane simultaneously in the past, present, and in the community's intentions for the future. Engaging with this mnemonic landscape can then be described as 'memory work' (see Rapport and Williksen 2010; Maconald 2013; Beel et al. 2017).

What makes the mnemonic landscape at Bellfield particularly powerful is that, as a parish church bustling with generations of both secular and religious activity, Portobello Old became an example of what Bakshi describes as 'place as a "memory frame": as a background or setting for events and daily activities, such that we do not remember events in isolation, but rather as situated within particular landscapes or buildings' (Bakshi 2017: 12). The subjective nature of memory has thus been melded to the real and recollected place, following Lowenthal's famous claim that 'the locus of memory lies more readily in place than in time' (1997: 180). Bakshi goes on to explain that 'these sites link memories with temporal structure: The 'when' and the 'where' are inextricably linked', creating places of memory (2017: 12).

This complexity also introduces the conceptual depth of 'place', where 'places are doubly constructed: most are built or in some way physically carved out. They are also interpreted, narrated, perceived, felt, understood, and imagined', as opposed to strictly spatial and geographic sites (Gieryn 2000: 465). This conceptualisation is a useful tool for understanding how 'the relationship between people and places influences the identities of individuals and groups', which is a feature of this research as Action Party was formed by those with a sense of connection with the former parish church, and this relationship then guides the generation of Bellfield as a place (Easthope 2007: 137. See also: Massey 1995; Ashworth and Graham 2005; Convery et al. 2012). As a *place* of memory, Bellfield is

inherently encountered through embodied engagements. 'As we open a door,' writes Juhani Pallasmaa, pioneering architect and critic on the phenomenology of architecture, 'the body weight meets the weight of the door; the legs measure the steps as we ascent a stairway; the hand strokes the handrail; and the entire body moves diagonally and dramatically through space' (2012: 67). Such lived experience generates what Casey describes as 'body memory': 'instances of remembering places, events, and people *with* and *in* the lived body' (2000: xi). Similarly, he describes 'place memory' as locating recollections and thus emplacing these lived experiences within a defined material context (2000: 190-197).

Social memory, connectedness and continuity

'I'm just helping out because I remember my kid performing on that stage and having birthday parties here, and I don't want to lose that.' Many people I encountered at Bellfield introduced themselves through such memories of events and activities in the spaces around us. How, then, are these memories, located in the former church, experienced as Bellfield evolves into its new identity as a community hub, and what role do they play in this process?

The mnemonic landscape is not an even terrain, as particular spaces hold greater significance for my informants. One might assume that the former sanctuary, with its distinctive features and grander scale, would be the locus of their place memories. However, everyone with whom I spoke focused instead on the two halls.

With this place, what I wanted to save was the Large Hall. The Large Hall is the reason why I've done all this work. It's a boring, ugly hall and it has provided such love and enjoyment. In doing that, we ended up saving the Small Hall and the Celebration Hall and all the rest of it. But that's the space that has been so vital. When you hear people talking about all their kids parties and school stuff and all the rest of it, the halls are the spaces they've used. That's what you remember when you look back on things. So yeah, that was the actual motive.

Such reflections on the significance of the halls were a common theme throughout my interviews with Action Party members. When asked about her favourite space or area, one woman also immediately focused on the Large Hall.

Joan: It was actually the 1960s Large Hall that was my favourite building. I dearly love that space. And it had a stage, you know. How wonderful was it that communities built stages. I think there is something to saving the church space here because it feels like the Queen's Hall and it has a beautiful acoustic... but that might need to change. But I wasn't saving the church as 'the church' anyways. I was saving that Large Hall space, and the Small Hall too.

MM: So in a sense it was more like saving the halls and the sanctuary—now the Celebration Hall—came with it.

Joan: Yeah, for me getting the Celebration Hall was like, 'Oh, another lovely space we can hire. Wow, grand!'

For these new owners, the two multi-use rooms—appropriately named the Small Hall and Large Hall for their respective sizes, the latter of which also has a stage and serving window into a kitchen located between the halls—are the spaces most associated with their own memories of the former church. Photos of these two spaces are provided below. As one woman explained of her involvement: 'I am not a church goer, so it wasn't for the church. I think I'd been in the church building once... but I had hired the halls. I'd hired the halls and used them for kids' birthday parties and things.' These spaces dominate discussions of people's histories and experiences, and, as seen in the recollections above, memories of shared or communal activities are the source of this significance.



Figure 23. The Small Hall (left) and Large Hall (right) (Photos by author)

Birthday parties and local organisation meetings. Scouts and Guides. School performances and Portobello maker markets. Generations of such gatherings and activities have accumulated in a continuous chain of social memory enclaved in the halls at Bellfield. Social memory can be described as an evolving 'collection of fragmented stories that revolve around family histories, events, myths and community places' (Jones 2017: 25). Following from what Bakshi (2017) describes as a 'scholarly boom' around memory since the 1980s, much has already been established on social memory in the social sciences and humanities, including conceptual explorations of memory and culture (Nora 1989; Wertsch 2002), anthropological approaches (Climo and Cattell 2002), sociological definitions (Misztal 2003), and applications to material culture (Rowlands and Tilley 2006; Connerton, 2006).

Of particular interest for my purposes here is social memory within the context of the built environment, current understandings of which follow from Maurice Halbwach's (1992) work on how, as summarised by Crang and Travlou in their own work on the spatial and temporal nature of memory in Athens, 'sites of memory hold communal identities together—or divide them—and [...] the spatiality of memory links the social and the personal' (2001: 161). More specifically, my intentions can be viewed as aligned with Atkinson's focus on 'spatialities of memory' at 'mundane, everyday places' rather than the 'higher profile heritage sites and places of commemoration' that were long the focus of such discussions (2007: 521). The ubiquity of parish churches and their halls across Scotland makes them ideal sites for analyses of 'everyday' social memory.

Focusing on the nature of social memory at Bellfield explains not only its origins and trajectory as a community hub, but the experiences of those involved. As one Portobello native explained:

I didn't want [the church] to be turned into flats, and I wanted the opportunity to keep on having activities here. Because I know the space. And even though I know it a lot better now than I did before, I still knew it reasonably well since it was this shared feature in our lives. We can all remember parties and craft fairs and things.

Like many others, she explained how she had frequently used the former church for everyday activities and life events while growing up, and now she wants to protect the ability to continue those experiences with her own children. 'It has always been there for me,' as another woman explained. 'I just took that for granted. You know, I've been in Portobello a long time and it's always been there and it's always had community activities.'

Whilst those two women have inter-generational connections to Bellfield, individuals who moved to the area relatively recently also described the significance of this long chain of gatherings and shared experiences, which they have come to consider an integral part of not only Bellfield's identity, but that of the community as a whole.

This was the case one sunny afternoon as I sat in the Small Hall with a man who had moved to the area only a few years earlier and who had no connection with the former church prior to joining the Action Party board of trustees. Bellfield was quiet for the time being—school kids would soon begin migrating to the Large Hall for youth theatre activities and the Celebration Foyer for afterschool singing lessons held by a local vocal coach. We had dragged a pair of chairs from where they were stacked in a corner of the room to sit beside a wall of windows that looked out onto the kirkyard-turned-garden. Our discussion eventually shifted to why he became involved in the community buy-out.

It's not just the churches themselves that are lost, the church halls are also lost too. In some ways they're more important than the church itself because that's where everyone had their parties and plays and book festivals and what have you. Losing the place where those things happened for so long would be like an identity crisis for the whole community.

In this instance, awareness of such emplaced social memories perpetuated the identity of the former church as a significant shared place and intrinsic feature of the Portobello community.

Returning to the question of how memories are involved in the evolution from former church to community hub, it is clear that in addition to establishing this as a place of gathering and shared experience, the accumulation of emplaced social memories creates a sense of continuity and connection within the community. Through the buy-out the people of Action Party have mobilised to ensure this continues to develop into the future. As one of the board members described their mission: 'I think it's important to definitely keep the deep connection it has within the community, but to enable the future to open up too.'

This sense of moving forward, of continuing to develop while rooted in and guided by emplaced memories, evinces how Bellfield is what Pierre Nora famously described as *milieu de mémoire*, or 'real environments of memory' (1989: 7-9). It is a 'lived-landscape', where Ellie is repainting the doors, another generation of children are using the halls for after school activities, and the former church continues to be a central part of community

life (ibid.: 8). As opposed to *lieux de mémoire*, ‘sites of memory’, where memory ‘crystallizes and secretes itself’ (ibid.: 7–8). The latter ‘range from archives to museums, parades to moments of silence, memorial gardens to resistance monuments, ruins to commemorative fast days’ (Young 1993: viii). However, the presence of memorials—examples of such ‘crystalised’ memory—adds another dimension to this already complex place of memory and is considered in the following section.

Knitted into place: Memorials

Memorials are stories knitted into the place, figuratively and literally.

–Action Party trustee, 2019

Action Party inherited a number of memorials embedded into the building and affixed to furnishings left behind by the congregation. Guidance by the General Trustees on the ‘disposal’ of churches describes three types of memorial: individual, war, and items gifted to the congregation (2001: 3). With nearly a dozen such pieces at Bellfield, the people of Action Party must come to their own understandings of the significance of these material manifestations of memory culture and what role they will play in the new community hub.

Memorials are ‘iconographic forms’ intended to create ‘special sites for collective remembering’, making them material manifestations of social memory (Edensor 2005: 830). As a site of adaptive reuse due to a decline in congregation size, Bellfield presents a situation where the original audience for these memorials is no longer present, which shifts the memorials from their intended place in the mnemonic landscape. This is not to say that they are ‘set adrift in a secular world’, as some commentary on church reuse would assume (Clark 2007: 77). Rather, their significance is re-negotiated as they are actively incorporated into the life and identity of the community hub, serving as a means of maintaining a connection to the past life of place and the local history they represent, as well as representing historical artistic expressions.

These memorials take the form of large marble or wooden plaques set into the walls for ministers and elders, and objects with brass plaques or carved text gifted in memory of congregants. In such cases where a piece can be moved, the General Trustees suggest that, before closure, surviving family are located and offered the memorial (2001: 3).

While I cannot confirm how many were in place originally, 11 of this type remained during my fieldwork, some occupying large and prominent positions, such as the one pictured below, directly in front of the main doors and above the tables on which promotional materials are set for visitors to browse. Objects with brass plaques include several pews and a lectern, while a large ornately carved wooden communion table bears a memorial inscription.



Figure 24. Bellfield main entrance with a marble memorial on the wall above a table of flyers and brochures advertising activities and services hosted at Bellfield and elsewhere in Portobello (Photo by author)

During an interview in the Celebration Foyer—itself host to stone memorials to Rev George Thomas Jamieson (1838-1926) and organist Walter Stevenson Brown (1882-1926) set into one wall—I asked one woman what she would physically change about the former church and why. In addition to comments about modernisation, energy efficiency, and musings on the pews and windows which will be considered in a following section on secondhandedness, she turned her attention to the memorials.

Caroline: I would take down some of the things, like the memorial pieces.

MM: All of them or just certain ones?

Caroline: Oh, that's a good point. I think just the more 'churchy' ones, like the ones dedicated to the ministers. I think we'll obviously keep them, because they belong here and they're part of its history and who we are now, but maybe not in the same places if we want to have spaces that feel inclusive to everyone.

While opinions on what should be done with these pieces—if anything—varied from leaving them in situ to moving them to another church or removing them but keeping them somewhere else on the premises, her general opinion that they are still significant for Bellfield was echoed by others.

They are stories in themselves. There could be some really interesting things coming out of looking at the pasts of some of these people. And it's significant having those stories here at a community hub. They're knitted in. Memorials are stories knitted into the place, figuratively and literally. They're our history.

In this perspective, the presence of memorials index the historic status of the building within the community and have become 'our history', transcending affiliation with the former church.

At first glance, this emphasis on the historic value of such ecclesiastical material culture seems to confirm arguments that, in secularised former churches, things left behind are 'relegated to the status of heritage' (Clark 2007: 77). Heritage in this perspective is cast as a negative, inert thing rather than a dynamic and lived social construct, 'a process of engagement, an act of communication and an act of making meaning in and for the present' (Smith 2006: 1). However, such 'relegated' status are neither the intent nor the experience of my informants. 'That's part of our ongoing story,' as one man described the memorials

and other overtly religious objects and features. 'I think accepting the past is part of how we make who we are in the present. Allowing for the continuation of some of those references is part of saying "we're at ease with ourselves and at ease with our history".' Rather than museum pieces separated from the active life of place, these memorials are part of a living, evolving identity.

In addition to memorials to individuals, there are also three dedicated to WWI and one dedicated to WWII listing those killed from the congregation, with the exception of one that lists those who served. This curious arrangement will be explained following their description. Two are large marble panels set in the wall on either side of the pulpit dais in the Celebration Hall, a third hung nearby on a wall behind a section of pews is made of wood with gothic details and gilt lettering, and the last, a wooden frame surrounding a dark metal information panel with a botanical motif, is located in the corridor between the Celebration and Large Halls. As war memorials they were created to 'commemorate the soldiers who died defending their country. They provide reassurance that the soldiers' sacrifice was worthwhile. They give closure through assurances and provide certainty of the values that have been defended' (Donahoe 2014: 125).

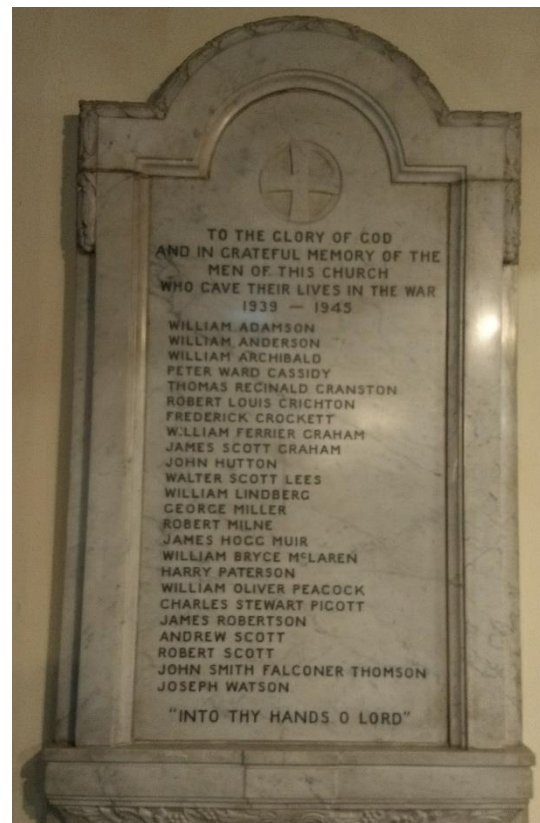


Figure 25. Marble memorials to WWI (left) and WWII (right) located on either side of the pulpit in the Celebration Hall. Note the crossed rifles on the bottom of the WWI memorial (Photos by author)

According to the General Trustees, 'items such as War Memorials should normally be removed, particularly if the building is likely to be used for secular purposes or demolished. In some cases it may be appropriate to install such items in another Church of Scotland building but this will not always be so' (General Trustees 2001: 3). This explains how Portobello Old Parish Church likely acquired multiple memorialised lists of names beyond its own marble examples shown above. It is important to note that all but one are currently affixed to the building, which no longer qualifies for ecclesiastic exemptions, making them subject to statutory protections for listed buildings as described in Chapter Two. Consequently, listed building consent is now required to remove these memorials (Shaw 2013: 35). This complicates discussions of what Action Party would like to do and brings in their experiences and opinions of heritage legislation and oversight, which is beyond the scope of this current investigation.

Critiques of war memorials in discourse on place and memory cite their patriotic and wartime symbolism, and how they are often 'drenched in masculinised, classed, and racialised ideologies' (Edensor 2005: 830. See also: Edensor and Kothari 1996). These memorials can be said to create a 'singular sense of the past' that is 'assumed, closed down [against] contestation or debate', as they materialise particular narratives of place, identity, and history (Massey 1995: 183). Also, as Ashworth and Tunbridge describe, there may be an inherent discomfort in facing commemorations of traumatic events (1996; see also: Smith 2006: 81). In the year I spent at Bellfield, I only encountered one instance of criticism or discomfort towards the war memorials. This was due to the presence of crossed rifles carved in relief on one large marble WWI memorial in the Celebration Hall. The individual did not find the symbolic presence of weaponry suitable for a community space that often caters to children, though they conceded that the memorial's significance as a historic piece listing local war dead ultimately outweighed its objectionable details.

The category of war memorials as discussed above encompasses expressions from obelisks in village squares to dedicated museum spaces and simple plaques on park benches (see: Mansfield 1995; Webster 2008; Macdonald 2013). The church war memorial as a typology is unique for its hyperlocality, more so than even the village memorial, concerned as it is with members of that particular congregation. They are also subject to at times drastically shifting contexts when churches are reused for myriad new purposes. Consequently, I would argue for more nuance than is currently found in discussions of war

memorials to account for such differing circumstances and better facilitate inquiries such as my own into the role of these features in the adaptive reuse of churches.

The presence of these war memorials and others lends both figurative and literal weight to Bellfield's identity as a place of memory. As a result, Bellfield is viewed by the community as a suitable repository for other objects associated with local history, forcing Action Party to navigate both this additional dimension of place and the expectations of area residents. In one such example, they accepted a request to take in a war memorial from another area CofS church that closed and has since been converted into a private residence. A former member of that congregation described Bellfield as the 'next best home' for this memorial because it is an accessible, community-owned space already in possession of similar pieces.

We had our plaque for the memorial with the names on it... It's actually through there [points at nearby door] because I got the Action Party board to accept it. Because I did think it needed to be kept. Strangely enough, the list of names isn't of people who died in the First World War, it's of people who served, which is rather unusual. But obviously our church was very fortunate, nobody was killed. I was lucky we got that here instead of losing it in the shuffle. It does match the others here already and now it can be seen.

This instance demonstrates how Bellfield may be seen as a sanctuary of sorts for historical local pieces that have lost their original contexts. A similar re-homing, as it were, occurred with a large educational board on the history of area potteries that had been on display near the promenade for a number of years. It was accepted with some reluctance, and through the end of my fieldwork a final decision on what to do with it remained murky. It could be displayed, however, it was so large that it would change the nature of the chosen space and render it less versatile for events. There was also talk of giving it to a local primary school, making Bellfield a local heritage stopgap while other avenues are explored.

In facing such decisions, members with whom I spoke expressed a wariness of becoming a community 'memory storehouse' rather than a versatile hub of activity (Clark 2007: 77). This recalls the earlier description of Bellfield as a 'real environment of memory', rather than a static repository (Nora 1989: 7-9). 'It's always a balancing act, and I presume it always will be to some extent,' as one trustee described the situation. 'We're a community place in a historic building. It makes sense that people would assume we're interested in protecting all these local things too. But we're not a museum. We're not a heritage body.'

We have to strike a balance.’ When asked what that balance might look like, he did not have a sure answer, as they were still learning for themselves through each new day as Bellfield. ‘We’re figuring it out. Maybe that’s the key—always keep evolving! Come back and see us in five years, ten years, twenty years on.’

The memorials discussed throughout this section are highlighted during reflective events, such as war remembrance days and history lectures, providing a physical focus for these performative engagements with memory culture. Such events will be explored in the following section, which examines how Action Party deliberately performs their relationship with the past to help shape the current and future identity of Bellfield.

Performing memory

The performative aspect of memory culture discussed here involves deliberate engagements with material traces of the past that inform Bellfield’s identity as a community hub. This memory work serves to reaffirm Bellfield’s rootedness in the community and reinforce its identity as an inclusive centre of local life. These ‘enunciative acts’, as Basu describes such engagements, take varied forms as people relate to places of shared memory (2005: 123). In my time at Bellfield, such enunciative acts I will explore here include the creation and curation of textual histories and the hosting commemorative events.

For this section on performing memory culture in the reused church, I am particularly inspired by anthropologists Rapport and Williksen and their discussions on how a particular typology of place—in their case, *home*—exists through ‘moments of individual and collective performance which are both mundane and memorial (ceremonial)’, bringing together place, identity, memory, and performativity (2010: 3). With regards to the latter, rather than engaging in philosophical debates and tracing its conceptual lineage (see: Barad 2003), Rapport and Williksen and others interested in the experiential relationship between people and place utilise the broad term ‘performance’ to describe ‘different kinds of acts, different techniques or strategic practices’ engaged in physically or even psychologically for some aim (2010: 4). Examples include creating ‘home’ (ibid.), engaging with heritage sites (DeSilvey 2010; Jones 2012, 2017), establishing rural identities (Beel et al. 2017), or creating a sense of indigenous identity and connection for members of the Scottish diaspora (Basu 2005). ‘The concept of performance thereby enables an assessment of the ways in which

individuals act and react in the world. It is a means of understanding how people situate themselves in the world, for themselves and for others' (IPUP 2007). The first example I will address is the creation and deployment of textually mediated memory by Action Party in representing Bellfield.

Textually mediated memory

On the Bellfield entry table, amidst fliers for local events and activities, is a tidy stack of double-sided handouts explaining the architectural history of the building on one side and its various memorials on the other. Copies are often included with the flyer on room rental prices when prospective users stop by for tours and handed to curious visitors who just want to see inside the local landmark. This document is one example of textually mediated memory being employed, in this case, to establish an interpretation of Bellfield's history for a general audience and reinforce its identity as a local feature of historic architectural significance. Introduced by anthropologist James Wertsch in his efforts to define collective memory from a sociocultural perspective, 'textually mediated' memory refers to 'textual resources provided by others – narratives that stand in, or mediate, between the events and our understanding of them', so that rather than 'being grounded in direct, immediate experience of events', social memory is also fostered through the creation and dissemination of textual information (2002: 5).

Such textually mediated memory work deliberately engages with and presents select aspects of the mnemonic landscape in the pursuit of various objectives. The emphasis on architectural history and memorials in the flyer discussed above differs from history as presented in promotional materials during the buy-out campaign, which focused on the long-standing local and social role of the former church, as well as applications for funding, which require statements of history or significance tailored to each objective and employing targeted academic or industry language.⁶⁸ If Action Party follows through with ideas on developing Bellfield in ways that require listed building consent (as described in Chapter Two), they will have to present the former church's history in a format that is acceptable to

⁶⁸ One such an application was for funding due to the presence of Commonwealth war memorials. Whilst a respected but unremarkable feature in daily life at Bellfield, these memorials are highlighted in this particular context.

regulatory heritage and civil bodies such as Historic Environment Scotland and City of Edinburgh Council. Discourse analyses of these myriad acts of textual memory work by a fledgling community venture would undoubtedly yield beneficial insights in further research, but for my purposes it will suffice to present them as evidence of the memory work being undertaken at Bellfield.

In addition to creating such outward-facing documents as flyers, applications, and campaign materials, Action Party are also curating the new and evolving history of Bellfield for their own reference. This is in the form of an aptly titled 'Press Cuttings and Memories' binder, containing articles from local and regional publications along with copies of their campaign creations, applications, and other textual ephemera.⁶⁹ At the start of my fieldwork, I was encouraged to look through this binder to familiarise myself with the history of the community buy-out. As it is kept in the administrative office, this is a private archive, selectively documenting the journey from campaign to present-day, chronicling the evolution of Bellfield and its public perception in media coverage.

'It's a fitting place': Events

I attended multiple commemorative and educational history events of varying sizes and topics over the course of my year at Bellfield. These allowed me to experience and observe its role as a place of memory within these deliberate mnemonic contexts facilitated by Action Party. It is important to note that Action Party itself does not organise many events, rather 'we administer the spaces so that others can use them' (Cameron 2019: 7). This section uses two examples to discuss social memory work through the hosting of events, the first being a larger event to commemorate Armistice Day and the second a smaller local history lecture.

⁶⁹ It was never clear who was responsible for maintaining the binder, if such a task had been delegated at all, though presumably the administrator would be largely responsible due to its location in the office, supplemented by the Action Party board and administrative volunteers.

Armistice Day

People emerged from the November chill with homemade cakes, traybakes, and boxes of biscuits for an Armistice Day centenary event organised by Action Party at Bellfield.⁷⁰ As a volunteer, I assisted with setting up these donated goods in the Celebration Foyer, along with a tall carafe of coffee and a fresh kettle at the ready for tea. Proceeds from the sale of these refreshments would go to the War Memorials Trust. A decorated bucket was also set out to encourage donations. The local heritage society had donated a small stack of books on the history of Portobello during WWI to be sold for £5 each to benefit Action Party; these were set out on the counter by the refreshments. The online event notice had invited the public to ‘come and take a look around the unchanged former church, and learn about its history and war memorials’, enjoy a string quartet performance as part of Play4Peace, and hear a local historian ‘talk on Portobello’s connections to the First World War’ (Bellfield 2018).⁷¹ A photo from the lecture portion of the event, which took place in the Celebration Foyer, is presented on the following page.

This commemorative event engaged in powerful international memory culture surrounding WWI (see: Le et al. 2022) and situated this small community within it through the physical anchor of the ‘unchanged former church’ and its war memorials (Bellfield 2018). The space then became a vehicle for the revival of social memories as people were encouraged to wander and encounter the memorials for themselves as well as join in a presumably historical song—unfamiliar to me, perhaps due to my own age or nationality—that filled the spacious Celebration Hall. It was an emotional experience, which is significant because, as Smith explains of commemorative events at heritage sites, ‘the engagement of emotion and the sharing of this emotive experience or performance, together with sharing of acts of remembering and memory making, are vital elements of the glue that creates and binds collective identities’ (2006: 70).

⁷⁰ Armistice Day marks the cessation of hostilities in WWI.

⁷¹ 2018 was the first year of #iPlay4Peace, which ‘seeks to encourage discussion around conflict, cooperation and remembrance’ by uniting people through a unique piece of music to be performed on Remembrance Sunday (Poppyscotland 2021).



Figure 26. The lecture portion of the Armistice Day event at Bellfield, held in the Celebration Foyer (Photo by author)

History lecture

I arrived at the Small Hall shortly before the start of the lecture and found the room filled with rows of chairs facing a projector screen set up at one end. It was an evening lecture, so the wall of windows was already darkening and reflecting the small crowd of primarily older attendees gathered within. The lecture was arranged by Portobello Heritage Trust and would be given by representatives of the archaeology company responsible for excavating the site of the former Abercorn Brickworks. The site was being redeveloped for housing and archaeologists were here to explain their work thus far and what insights it had revealed about Portobello from the late 18th century onward. In addition to the archaeological history offered by the speaker, those in attendance engaged in memory work of their own as they negotiated this information within the contexts of their personal experiences—comments like ‘I remember finding bottles like that on the beach,’ or ‘My nan talked about the drying-houses,’ often precluded questions during the Q&A session, and there was much reminiscing and comparing of experiences afterwards.

‘It’s fitting to have the talk here. It’s a fitting place,’ one woman commented during a break, earning nods from those seated around her. This statement, or rather the meaning behind it, is important in understanding the significance of undertaking social memory work at Bellfield, even in instances where, as opposed to the larger Armistice Day event, there is not the same degree of tangible and emotional connection to the topic. What sets Bellfield apart from another location that could just as easily provide suitable facilities for hosting this lecture is the experience of performing memory work in a local place of memory, and in this instance Bellfield also happened to originate from the same period as the brickworks. Returning to Crang and Travlou’s discussion on the spatiality and temporality of places of memory, places like Bellfield and others with complex mnemonic landscapes can be said to ‘stand inserted simultaneously in a past order and the present, and are thus doubly located through (at least) two different sets of coordinates. In doing this they offer cracks in the surface of the present where time can be otherwise’ (2001: 175). This facilitates a ‘feeling of pastness’—that is to say, an awareness that what is being remembered is the past persisting into the present—that makes such events particularly affective and ‘fitting’ (Matthen 2010: 8; see also: Casey 2000: 40).

Whereas the Armistice Day event connected the people of Portobello to a dramatic international history and an ongoing movement for remembrance and anti-war solidarity, the local history lecture held up their industrial heritage, which features prominently in the Portobello identity. In both instances, Bellfield was more than a mere container, as its unique materiality as a place of memory actively contributed to—and arguably strengthened—how these events were experienced. While this section has been focused on the mnemonic landscape and memory culture at Bellfield, the following turns to the embodied experiences of its new owners and how they perform its identity as ‘a place to belong’.

4.3.2. Embodied engagement and performing place

Place, then, needs to be understood as an embodied relationship with the world. Places are constructed by people doing things, and in this sense are never 'finished' but are constantly being performed.

—Cresswell 2004: 37

This section considers the importance of embodied engagement in generating perceptions of place and community, as well as how Bellfield's identity as a community hub is performed by Action Porty through embodied practice. This is first explored through examples of what one trustee described as 'transformative' engagements with place, where even small actions contribute to notions of community as materially manifested in Bellfield. The remainder of this section then considers practices of place-making utilised by Action Porty. This includes tours of the building, a commitment to both continuity of uses and the hosting of diverse new events and activities, and finally material interventions promoting environmental sustainability.

Transformative engagements

While I previously discussed how engagement with the mnemonic landscape supports a sense of community identity, physically engaging with the building also has a transformative effect for those involved. My use of 'transformative' comes from an interview with a trustee during which we discussed how, before officially re-opening the former church as Bellfield, volunteers went through and 'refreshed' its spaces—painting, cleaning, and making minor repairs. As we discussed work done by volunteers, this interviewee reflected on the profound impact such hands-on involvement had on his son.

Being involved was lovely for me because one of my sons actually did most of the painting [in one particular area] and that was really nice. Him saying 'yes', he would do that. It was a transition for him, from being in his teens in that 'not very involved in the family or anything else and you're just doing your own thing' mindset to being much more outward looking and part of the community. So, it was an interesting rite of passage—painting that back door. For me, this was much more about seeing my son become more outward looking, whereas he had not been before. So that was an extraordinary opportunity. Just painting a door. It's extraordinary how a physical experience like that can be transformative.

The unexpected significance of a seemingly minor task like painting aligns with Crouch's focus on 'the apparently mundane, to explore the potential of working ideas of the performative and of embodied practice through the unremarkable, with the possibility of their becoming remarkable for the individual subject' (2003: 1948). By joining the effort, one becomes part of the community in a new and meaningful embodied way. This was explained further in another interview.

I think it has to do with belonging and community and offering something for nothing. That is a really alchemical transformation of people, when they do that. And that's like people coming on the board who are doing a huge amount for nothing, you know, absolutely nothing. It's not just paperwork; there's painting and gardening and moving furniture and replacing bits and bobs. You really are affirming the fact that you care anyway, and that the well-being of your community and those around you is priceless. So there is something interesting about doing it without being paid that I think has a transformative impact.

Similar to this 'transformative impact', another member of Action Party described how 'uniting around retaining and sustaining a community space is a way of bringing people back together' and strengthening the community as a whole.

The opportunity for members of the community to become physically involved at Bellfield was also felt to be important for its transformation into a truly community-owned place. This was explained during a conversation with a member of the Action Party board.

Folk just turned up for a couple hours [during preparations to re-open]. They did a contribution and left again. It's an investment, and I think all these wee bits of investment are what builds the... We talk about community ownership and legally the community does own it through Action Party, through our board that's elected by our membership, so legally that membership owns the company that owns the building. But it's really the social and emotional investment.

Throughout my fieldwork, I observed many such 'wee bits of investment' that contributed to the continual work of generating Bellfield's identity as a community hub. When it was decided that the Large Hall needed the ability to darken its clerestory windows for a youth theatre production, a local tradesman offered to do blind fittings at no cost because of his personal connection to the place. Volunteers told me how they tidied the green spaces, wound the clock in the Celebration Hall, opened and closed the gates for events, and more, all to be a part of this shared venture. 'If you compare this to the Town Hall, it's the exact opposite,' as one member explained, using the local municipal venue—which abruptly

closed near the end of my time in Portobello—for comparison. ‘Nobody is sweating their ass off developing the programme there or taking care of it. It doesn't know whether it's a community asset or a city-wide asset that happens to be based in Portobello. And that's what makes Belfield quite exciting. It feels different. It feels worthwhile.’ The opportunity for people to become involved and, as seen in the anecdote about one member’s son or Ellie’s experience painting the doors as pictured below, contribute to the community in a meaningful and embodied way is thus a critical aspect of its new identity as a community hub. Such engagements can also be described as techniques through which Belfield’s community identity and ethos are ‘performed’, an exploration of which is the focus of the following section.



Figure 27. Ellie painting the main doors in preparation for re-opening the former church as Belfield (Provided by Action Party and used with permission)

Performing place

The use of 'performance' here again follows from the work of Rapport and Williksen in their ethnographically-grounded exploration of the 'continuous work' of generating place identity through 'different kinds of acts, different techniques or strategic practices' deployed by both individuals and groups (2010: 3-4). They describe this deliberate, continual process of place-making as *emplacement*, the diverse techniques of which range 'from individual to collective, from formal to mundane. They incorporate a range of sensory deployments (visual, olfactory, tactile), and a variety of engagements with the passage of time, a variety of performances in space' (ibid.). Also considering the nature of performativity in relation to a physical setting, Crouch proposes *spacing* as 'practical ways in which the individual handles his or her material surroundings' (2003: 1945). The key difference between these concepts is that emplacement refers to intentional engagements with place to generate a sense of place identity or meaning, as opposed to spacing's broader interest in the 'flows of encountering and constituting space' (ibid.: 1949). As I am interested in deliberate engagements, I utilise the concept of emplacement to refer to performative acts of place-making.

Attention to such processes is important as place 'is not a natural given, but constituted through endowment with social meaning and constantly re-created through human practices, at both the interpretive and material level' (Pernau 2014: 542). In one study of community resilience in the UK, researchers describe how such performative engagements 'can be central to community identity as they attempt to make visible their own accounts of history and place' (Beel et al. 2017: 459). I observed and participated in multiple techniques utilised by Action Party to enact Bellfield's community hub identity. These are discussed below and include tours, facilitation of continued and diverse new uses, and material interventions.

Tours are performative acts of emplacement that encourage people to encounter Bellfield for themselves within specific frameworks controlled by Action Party (see: Jonasson 2009; Jonasson & Scherle 2012). My first visit to Bellfield, where Ellie proudly recalled how she had painted the front doors, included a tour through the otherwise quiet building with attention to details deemed significant for me to 'get to know' this place, all filtered through my guide's experiences as one of the original organisers of the community buy-out. There

was the 1930s fuse boxes by the main doors that controlled each individual light in the Celebration Hall, Foyer, and entrance, which she joked was a source of constant low-level anxiety; the stage in the Large Hall where she recalled performances by her children; a row of locked cupboards along the back wall of the Large Hall full of tables and chairs for events, stacks of assorted crockery, electric kettles, and other items to be used as needed, and a stash of snacks for the resident youth theatre programme. I was taken up to the gallery of the Celebration Hall to experience the scale of the space, at the time filled with late evening light through stained glass, but also to see the rows of pews that could not be utilised due to current fire safety regulations on building capacity and the number of exit doors. The corner closest to us was currently being used to store easels and other supplies for a local artist who regularly hired the downstairs Celebration Foyer to host art classes. This tour revealed Bellfield as she knew it as a leading member of Action Party and as I was being invited to know it through my fieldwork there. A place of fond memories and diverse daily activities, where the historical nature of the building was a source of beauty and appreciation yet also concern and constraint.

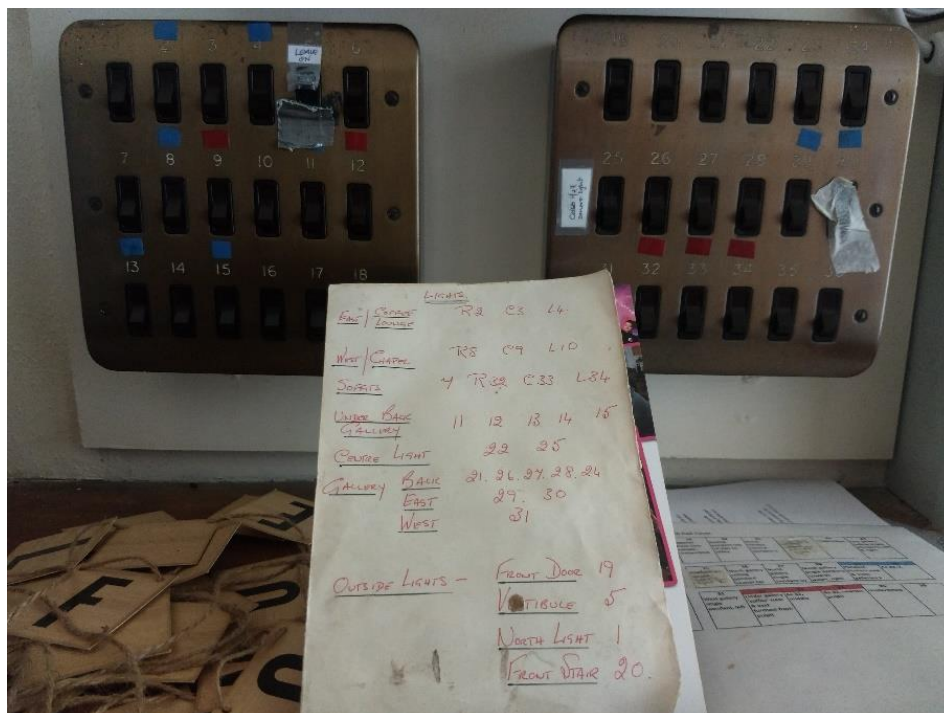


Figure 28. The fuse boxes used to operate lights in the entrance, Celebration Foyer, and Celebration Hall. Also included is the handwritten guide originally given to Action Party on how to operate the switches. One of my early tasks as a volunteer was to create a diagram that could be kept by the fuse boxes as a guide to their use, visible at the bottom right of the image (Photo by author)

Prospective users were given tours by the staff member, trustees, or other volunteers with an emphasis on the potential utility of various spaces for their needs and curious passersby who came to the main doors were offered tours if someone was available. Over the course of my time there, several women came to view the Celebration and Large Hall to envision guests and decorations in the spaces before their wedding ceremonies, while others wanted to visit certain rooms to judge their capacity and accessibility for potential fitness classes and fundraising events.⁷² The passersby primarily came to the door because they were interested in seeing the Celebration Hall, with its large scale, artistic details, and local heritage value.⁷³ Some were also interested in seeing the place after hearing about the community buy-out, in which case discussions focused on how various spaces had changed, remained the same, or were envisioned as changing in the future. Each of these represent a necessary dimension of making Bellfield a successful facility that is aware of its historic status while serving the community and remaining financially solvent.

There were also dedicated events that included tours. As part of the national Doors Open Days 2019 event, during which venues across the country encouraged people to visit and learn about the buildings and what goes on inside them, visitors were provided with the history handouts discussed previously and encouraged to go on self-guided tours.⁷⁴ When Bellfield hosted multiple events focused on the topic of community empowerment, each included a tour of this first successful example of an urban community buy-out. Allowing people to experience the place while guiding them with curated information was a prominent method of introducing people to Bellfield and establishing its identity as a community hub.⁷⁵ Tours were also intended to create a sense of transparency and accessibility—two traits repeatedly claimed by multiple individuals to be important aspects of Bellfield’s operation as a community endeavour.

⁷² I did not personally conduct any tours, though this was a possibility if no one else was available to do so. To prepare for this, I was told to study the history flyer and room hire policy to be able to answer most potential questions. I accompanied several tours given by the staff member, greeted visitors prior to their tours, and was told about the tours by those involved.

⁷³ This interest in heritage values of former religious places is addressed more directly in the upcoming section.

⁷⁴ Doors Open Days is part of the larger European Heritage Days and is ‘Scotland’s largest free festival that celebrates places, history and culture. It offers free access to over a thousand venues across the country throughout September, every year’ (Scottish Civic Trust 2023).

⁷⁵ I did not speak with any tour participants, so I cannot comment on their undoubtedly rich experiences. Such work would provide valuable insights into how AP’s actions are received and their impact on relationships with place. For more on the experiences of tours, see: Best & Hindmarsh 2019; Pink 2008; Jonasson 2009; Svensson 2021.

Another way that place is performed at Bellfield is through more of a mindset and constellation of actions rather than one definable act, and that is Action Party's interest in facilitating existing engagements between people and place. Or more simply put, maintaining continuity of use. As discussed earlier with regards to the mnemonic landscape, a sense of continuity and connection is important for the identity of a community place of memory like Bellfield, and one way of achieving this is by maintaining activities from the former church. This was most evident in Action Party's relationship with Portobello and Musselburgh Quakers, who had used the former church as their meeting place. They now meet at Bellfield on the first, second, and fourth Sundays of each month, and maintain a permanent material presence in the form of a large storage cupboard to the side of the main entrance. Maintaining continuity of use extended to non-religious users as well. As one instructor who regularly hired one of the halls both before and after the buy-out for exercise classes described their experience: 'Not much has changed for me. There was a brief disruption, obviously, then it was pretty much back to business as usual. They tried to keep it easy for us. The heart is all about community. Even more so now, like it's bigger and more active.' As that observation alludes, beyond just facilitating continuity of use Action Party are creating an inclusive and dynamic community hub.

This increasingly inclusive identity is performed through various engagements with the building. The first I discuss is how Bellfield is readily offered as an anchor for diverse local events, lending its physical presence and historical weight to these efforts while cultivating its own deep connections within the community. It has hosted local maker markets, fairs, art exhibits, served as the backdrop for a holiday light display, and been the iconic final stop of a festive parade. With regards to the range of events offered around the holiday season in particular, one trustee said, 'We supported the high street and Party community, not just the building.' Through such activities, the community hub becomes more deeply ingrained in the social and cultural fabric of Portobello. While speaking at an event on community empowerment and land reform, one heavily involved Action Party volunteer described efforts to become 'a place to belong' through hosting increasingly diverse events.

We host events that are not the sort of thing that went on in the old days of the Kirk. There have been two major Hindu celebrations in the last two months, and this weekend we've been taken over by the Lost Maps indie music festival...If we can use the goodwill and credibility we've generated to help build a Portobello that can be open and welcoming to new people and new things, then in my book we're doing the work of the spirit.⁷⁶

One of these large celebrations was the 2019 Scottish Ganesh Festival, pictured below.



Figure 29. Celebration Hall decorated for the Scottish Ganesh Festival (Photo by author)

According to the sole Bellfield staff member, 'The organisers of the Ganesh Festival asked "Would it be okay if we brought in our idol," because the site used to be a church.' To that, she described her response as, 'Yeah sure, it's not a church anymore. Do what you want and let me know if we can help with anything.' The event had yet to take place at the time of our conversation, so she went on to describe what would happen. 'The idol will be set up for 6 days, where people will come and visit and make offerings. Then there will be a procession around Porty, then they will take the idol into the sea.' She also told me about plans to host a 'hipster' music event. Though she personally found the music 'a bit unusual',

⁷⁶ It should be noted that while this member of Action Party is clearly of a religious disposition, whereas the majority of those involved were earlier described as largely non-religious, the emphasis on creating a welcoming place is shared and as such this statement can still be taken as representative of the organisation.

she and others expressed excitement at the opportunity to ‘make a new audience aware of the building’ and thus open its metaphorical doors even further.

Beyond facilitating such additional uses, Action Party have also made material changes in efforts to create Bellfield’s community hub identity. Of particular note for my purposes here is the kitchen between the two halls. When my fieldwork began, it had recently been modified to meet current health and safety regulations and painted by a few volunteers. One of my first tasks as a Bellfield volunteer was to take stock of existing tableware and cookware, because a member of the board was due back from IKEA with a new induction hob, mugs, and accessories to outfit the kitchen. When she returned, I helped haul boxes from her car into the kitchen. Disheveled from the effort but in cheerful spirits at the prospect of a ‘nice shiny new kitchen’, she told me how finishing this room was a priority. Beyond the fact that a fully-functional kitchen makes the halls more attractive to potential users and better able to cater to events, several of my informants commented on the greater significance of providing this kind of space for the community.

The role of food and practices surrounding meals are well-established topics of social enquiry (see: Douglas 1972; Farb and Armelagos 1980; Klein and Murcott 2014) and particularly relevant here is the connection between meals and place-making (see: Dunlap 2009; Brun Norbye 2010). The ability to host meals, from birthday parties to weddings—and on this topic one trustee specified Hindu and Muslim weddings, demonstrating once again a commitment to inclusivity—is about more than simply providing a service. When I asked one woman about why it was important to have a community place like Bellfield, she pointed to the ability to come together: ‘It’s the hub of community... And it’s that face-to-face. Eating together and shared experiences.’ Collective spaces for making and sharing meals are significant because they provide opportunities ‘to embrace social differences and to facilitate the circulation of ideas and practices of care and hospitality. They operate as provisional bridging mechanisms between people, communities, projects and services...’ (Marovelli 2019: 190). This description encapsulates Bellfield’s mission and demonstrates why Action Party’s efforts to improve the kitchen also performs the community hub place identity they are attempting to generate.

‘Environmental sustainability,’ a member of the board explained during our first meeting, ‘is one of the pillars of the project.’ This key value is performed at Bellfield through material changes made in response to the ongoing climate crisis, which is felt to be an issue

of critical local importance and thus inextricably connected to Bellfield's identity as a community hub.⁷⁷ 'Why are we doing all this work for the community when that very community is under threat from climate change? Meeting that threat has to be part of our mission,' as another trustee explained. 'Being a coastal community in particular, I think we feel this extra acutely.' In this perspective, making the building more sustainable is an act of protecting the community and promoting its health, safety, and longevity. While doing this, Action Party are also promoting what was described to me as 'local energy democracy' to benefit and raise awareness in the surrounding community.⁷⁸ Examples of material changes include: installing solar panels on the roof of the Large Hall the community can track online, winning funding for the installation of bike racks to promote bicycling in the area, and the creation of a community garden that includes a wheelchair-accessible path. Three members of the board also visited Gate Church in Dundee as part of the Low Carbon Challenge Fund (LCCF), where they learned about what the church has done through their Carbon Saving Project to make buildings more environmentally sustainable.⁷⁹ My informants expressed a keen interest in developing this climate-conscious facet of Bellfield's identity further by making additional changes to promote sustainability, such as increased insulation, improving the antiquated heating system, and replacing certain doors and windows.

⁷⁷ The climate crisis and environmental sustainability are dominant topics amongst community initiatives in Scotland today, see: Chorley 2018; Dinnie and Holstead 2018.

⁷⁸ The growing push for energy democracy in Scotland 'regards the transition to renewable energy as an opportunity for socio-economic transformation, as well as technological innovation' for communities with greater control of their energy production and distribution (Van Veelen 2018).

⁷⁹ According to Scottish Enterprise, who manage the fund, 'LCCF provides competitive grant funding for academic institutions, public bodies, and third-sector organisations to support initiatives helping SMEs [small and medium-sized enterprises] to unlock global opportunities of the climate emergency. In doing so, it contributes toward Scotland's target of reaching net zero emissions' (2023).

4.3.3. 'Enable the future to open up too': Navigating the inherited place

The final section of this chapter turns to how Action Party navigates and experiences the inherited nature of the former church, which includes what can be considered a 'profusion' of objects that accompanied the sale of the building (Macdonald, Morgan, and Fredheim 2020: 156). They routinely face decisions on how to engage with what was left behind—acts of emplacement that clarify Bellfield's identity in relation to the former church. Here I introduce the concept of 'secondhandedness' as inspired by Hetherington's work on consumption and disposal, which describes a social process of negotiating absence after a thing or place has been disposed of.

Rather than focusing on the experiences of those who have disposed of something (in this case the Kirk or congregation), I focus on the inheritors (Action Party) who must decide for themselves how to value and engage with these things. The former church is also caught between evolving regimes of value that affect how Action Party interact with its inherited place. At times, their attempts to engage with the inherited material landscape are frustrated by the things themselves. I conceptualise the cause of these tensions as 'confounding materiality', referring to how the material nature of things can defy acts of emplacement. This chapter ends with the compromise voiced by many members of Action Party regarding balancing the needs of the vibrant community hub against its material inheritance.

Before continuing, it is important to note that the parish church was already a site of change and 'secondhandedness' for generations within the Kirk as it continually evolved to meet the changing needs of its community. It has been 'in flight' since its inception: multiple extensions were built; the organ, stained glass windows, and finely carved box pews were added; the kirkyard was established and then largely removed; memorials from other congregations were brought in; wallpaper and paint colours have changed... This has never been a static place, and as Action Party now engage in their own acts of emplacement, the process continues.

A focus on the inherited nature of place—having been 'disposed' of by the Kirk, according to official language from the General Trustees (2001)—can benefit from anthropological discourse on waste and disposal. This perspective 'attempts to locate how getting rid of things is integral to the performance of social relations, kinship networks, and

ritual knowledge and activity' (Hetherington 2004: 158). It is also concerned with how disposing of things 'has a complex role in formations of values' (Hawkins and Muecke 2002: 10). When places are the subject of disposal, they are often in the form of ruined or abandoned buildings, making vibrant adaptive reuse projects like Bellfield unique territory for future explorations into the complexity of 'systems of disposal' (Edensor 2005: 836). Whilst such an analysis is beyond my interests here, from these discussions on disposal comes Hetherington's concept of *secondhandedness*, an interpretation of the dynamics of disposal that considers the importance of 'a receiving as well as a giving hand' in the disposal process, though the emphasis remains on the process itself or the experiences of those who initiated the disposal and now feel its absence, return, or are 'haunted' by its lingering in some way (2004: 171). In this, Action Party can be viewed as the receiving hand. From here I will use my own interpretation of secondhandedness focusing on those who have received or inherited what was disposed of (i.e. the former church and its contents) and how they navigate the 'secondhand' materiality of place, including how these things are valued in the new context of Bellfield.

'Pretty much everything was left behind. The congregation took valuables, like communion silver, and I think a few important pieces. Both congregations could bring a few things into the new church. Not that it was a hard rule, there just wouldn't be space for everything,' a long-time user of the halls recalled over coffee at a café on nearby Portobello High Street. However, the process was more complicated than everything simply being 'left behind', as she went on to explain:

Paige: I was involved in emptying the church, taking everything to that big building... another empty church down in Musselburgh. They agreed to take it all for a bit. There's a nursery and at the back of it there's this big empty church. Very derelict. I don't think anyone could buy it out and take it over at the moment. It's too far gone. But it's a beautiful big hall space, very similar in size to the big hall here, maybe even bigger. So we took everything out [of the parish church] and took it all down there. It was exhausting. And then I was involved in bringing it all back.

MM: Why did you have to take everything out and then bring it all back?

Paige: I think it was to do with insurance purposes, because it was then an empty building. I think the church could then insure the empty building until it changed hands. So there were pianos and all sorts of things. It was all being thrown in with the sale at no extra cost, but they couldn't just leave it there. It had to go. There were beautiful big nativity

sets and lovely chairs. I think even there was maybe a gown, you know. They took what they wanted and then everything else—hundreds of chairs and tables of all sorts—were all left behind for us to decide what to do with.

Two important details emerged from this conversation: the quantity of items left behind and their variety, from tables to liturgical tools and displays. It describes the complexity of this inherited material landscape and alludes to the complicated nature of Action Party's ensuing attempts to navigate—or in her words, 'decide what to do with' it.

What Action Party encountered can also be described as a 'profusion' of things, much of which was inherited simply as a consequence of their purchase of the building. This neutral term used by Macdonald, Morgan and Fredheim in their discussion on the accumulation of objects by museums allows for the emergence of a more nuanced understanding of how these objects are understood and engaged, which this section explores at Bellfield (2020: 156). Attending to how Action Party experience this profusion of things while renegotiating the identity of the former parish church as Bellfield is significant as it reflects the nature of values—or lack thereof—scribed to each item and, by extension, 'particular people, memories and histories' associated with them (ibid.: 161).

As for the things themselves, this 'secondhand' material landscape is populated by what Basu describes as 'diasporic objects', entangled in 'ongoing social, spatial, temporal and material trajectories and relationships, dislocations and relocations' (2017: 2). The shifting of place identity from church to community hub can be understood as what Basu terms *dislocation* and *relocation*, an unsettling of contexts. I am interested in how Action Party engage with this profusion of entangled objects and how they are influenced by concepts explored earlier in this chapter, including social memory and sense of place, as well as notions of heritage and value.

Whilst a wide variety of things were 'left behind', the majority of this material landscape is not overtly religious in nature—foldable tables and chairs, portable heaters, stacks of crockery—and their origins within the former church did not seem to imbue any particular significance in these mundane items. They are valued for their utility in furnishing the community hub with opportunities to host gatherings and events and thus facilitate its mission. Overtly liturgical objects and even artefacts within the grounds, however, were sites of considerably more complex negotiations. As Bellfield is an inherently secular place—

though I was told by one trustee that Action Party explicitly avoids such language to not alienate current and potential religious uses, and I have endeavoured to replicate this discursive preference throughout my own discussions—an examination of the relationship between this non-religious entity and the religious remnants that still comprise the material nature of place is unavoidable.

The significance of objects more overtly associated with the former church—stained glass, crosses, liturgical furnishings—are re-negotiated as things of aesthetic and historical value. One afternoon, while crossing the Celebration Hall en route to the Large Hall with an Action Party volunteer, the sun broke through and lit the vibrant stained glass scenes and figures in the lower level windows and two upper windows on either side of the decorative organ loft. When I asked my companion what they thought of having such scenes in a community hub, they said: ‘We can't get away from the beautiful artwork that is the glass. Now it's appreciating it as historical artistry rather than Apostle whoever telling us whatever.’ On another occasion, I was shown where two decorative angel finials from a war memorial had been set aside on a window ledge, ‘because an accidental bump could damage them’. I was given one while my companion gently rolled the other around in her hands, admiring it. ‘Just look at the details. Just beautiful. You don't see craftsmanship like this as much anymore. Probably made locally, too.’ In these examples, pictured below, it was not the subject that made them significant and considered worth appreciation and protection, but rather their artistry, workmanship, and even potential local provenance.

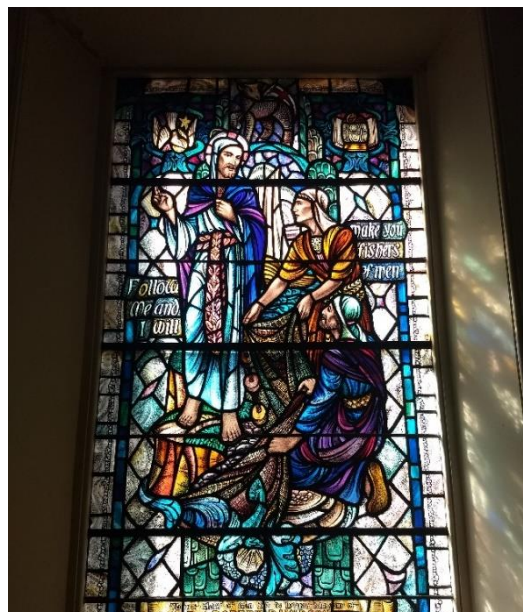


Figure 30. Carven wooden angel finial (left) and stained glass window depicting biblical scene (right)
(Photos by author)

This shift to aesthetic and historical significance at Bellfield follows trends noted in other church reuse projects across Europe and the Anglosphere, where new secular owners view their inherited religious material culture as artefacts to be protected and appreciated as heritage and art (Velthuis and Spennemann 2007; Clark 2008; Beekers 2018). The executive director of Historic Churches Scotland described this as a common reaction to old church buildings. ‘The past seeps down into the stones’, imbuing these places with a unique dimension of materiality that new owners are able to connect with and thus seek to protect. In another example at Bellfield, I was told how someone was ‘insisting on keeping the pile of rubble from when the wall was widened, even though it’s not original’, referring to the boundary wall. This staunchly non-religious individual was insisting on protecting the perceived material integrity of the historic former church property now under their care.

This ‘heritigisation of religion’, as the phenomena has been dubbed, ‘whereby material culture, places and praxis from the past are made – or presented as – meaningful in the present’, can also be viewed as a means of making places feel more accessible to diverse audiences (Bowman and Sepp 2019: 80). Bowman describes the ‘heritigised’ Camino of Santiago de Compostela in Spain.

Perhaps it is the heritagisation aspect of the Camino that enables people to feel heirs to it, participate in it, feel part of a long tradition of spiritual travellers (though their worldviews are not those of medieval or even contemporary Catholics/Christians), use the infrastructure of the Catholic Church (which they might normally distance themselves from), value the *credencial* and *Compostela* (although they may not normally describe themselves as religious, and have no interest in indulgences) and attend the Pilgrim Mass, seek a pilgrim blessing or participate in the ‘pilgrim tradition’ of hugging the statue of St James on arrival at Santiago Cathedral (even though they want or expect nothing from him).

While this quote was referring to active churches along the Camino, there were multiple occasions where I was told that Bellfield was now used by people who would not normally step foot inside a church, and the shift in value from religious to heritage is at least in part responsible. However, this cannot be said to be universal within the community. During the 2019 Doors Open Days event, as I was welcoming a pair of older men through the Celebration Foyer and moving towards to Celebration Hall, one stopped at the threshold into the former sanctuary, put up his hand, and ruefully said, “No thanks, I’m not

comfortable spending time in churches.” This was despite previously being quite animated and good-spirited while discussing the community buy-out.

The above examples considered deliberate engagements with what was left behind, however, I also observed instances of what could be described as ‘unfinished or unmanaged disposal’, where liturgical remnants went overlooked or forgotten, erupting the past life of place into the community hub and testifying to the ‘absent presence’ of the former congregation (Harrison 2013: 177; see also: Edensor 2005; Hetherington 2001; 2004). In exploring how museums decide what to keep when experiencing a profusion of things, Macdonald, Morgan and Fredheim similarly observe that ‘sometimes things just ‘stick around’ – that is, they are not so much actively ‘kept’ as merely ‘staying put’ ’ without human intention or intervention (2020: 165). One example is an old hymn book left open on the large pulpit atop the dais of the Celebration Hall. I questioned several people about why it was there and received only surprise or confusion, as they were not even aware of it. ‘I’ve never noticed since I’ve never been up there,’ as one person told me. A view of the pulpit from the gallery is provided below, showing the open hymn book atop a Church of Scotland brocade. Another interesting remnant is not the object itself, but rather the outline of where it once was, as shown in a photo on the following page. On a wall in the Celebration Hall is the large outline of a cross, where demarcations of an absence create a new sense of presence. Similar to Harrison’s description of the ‘spectral traces’ of the Berlin Wall maintaining an ‘absent presence’ and acting as a metaphor for the changing of regimes, so too does this outline maintain the presence of the congregation while simultaneously reminding of its departure (2013: 177).



Figure 31. The pulpit with open hymn book and burning bush cloth as seen from the upper gallery level (Photo by author)



Figure 32. Faint outline of a cross on a wall of the Celebration Hall (Photo by author)

At times, attempts to navigate the inherited material landscape are stymied by the very nature of things that comprise it, resulting in impasses at which acts of emplacement cannot be made. I describe the cause of such impasses as ‘confounding materiality’. This ‘confounding’ nature can be seen as a consequence of what Basu terms ‘inbetweenness’, where things left behind are neither as they were used and known by the congregation nor what Action Party can use in the process of emplacement.

...between one thing and another; intermediate; neither this nor that...
Inbetweenness is a middle ground, a contact zone, a borderland. It is a relational space, a space of networks and conjunctions; but it can also be a void, a limbo, a zone of suspended animation, of severed relationships (2017: 8-9).

Heeding Ingold’s advice to focus on materiality in the literal sense of ‘the stuff that things are made of’—along with an attentiveness to the embodied experience of engaging with these things—offers a particularly useful perspective for understanding why certain objects seem to defy attempts to generate a new place from the former church (2007: 1).

The most prominent examples of this are the pews. In the Celebration Hall, the pews were described as inflexible and uncomfortable, restricting potential uses for the space. There are examples of similar venues, including active churches, which have removed all or

some of their pews in favour of flexible seating for these reasons.⁸⁰ However, the warmth of the wood tones, the look and feel of their aged surfaces, the acoustic quality their massing lends to the otherwise cavernous room, and even the faint yet distinct smell of a space full of old wooden furniture on a warm day were all reasons why people also expressed fondness for the pews. One trustee summarised the issue by saying, 'Although the pews look fantastic, they are constraining in equal measure.'

These rows of seating spatially and visually dominate the ground and gallery levels, making them a defining feature for the identity of the space both historically and in its new use. As such, discussions on what to do with the pews had made no progress even a year after Bellfield's re-opening. On several occasions I was told that they would wait until an architect—an outside authority opinion—came in and offered proposals on what could be done with the Celebration Hall, creating the option to bypass the confounding nature of the pews by choosing between proposed designs rather than confronting the objects directly.

This discussion on the secondhand nature of Bellfield concludes by presenting the sense of compromise that guides how my informants attempt to balance the inherited nature of place and their efforts to generate Bellfield's identity as a community hub. The general perspective I encountered amongst members of Action Party was demonstrated during a conversation with one individual about the garden, which is also the former kirkyard, where they described how efforts would be made to accommodate the remaining gravestones while altering the space to meet evolving current needs.

So like with the gravestones, where you want to move them up to the boundary wall if you needed to use the space in the grounds outside. Or if you want to create a kind of sensory garden for people with dementia or whatever else, then you may be able to keep the headstones where they are and work around them. You'd want to respond to people with serious needs in the living community rather than being constrained from taking care of them. It's tricky.

The desire to compromise between the ability to modify according to current needs and the inherited nature of the building emerged in a conversation with another member about whether anything should be done regarding Christian symbolism in the Celebration Hall.

⁸⁰ Over the course of my fieldwork I visited examples of churches or community hubs in former churches that have removed some or all of their pews, including: St Andrew's and St George's West in Edinburgh; Polwarth Parish Church in Edinburgh; Pyramid at Anderston in Glasgow.

It depends. I was wondering about the stained glass windows, the ones higher up. If they were not stained glass, would you get more light? In that case I would say 'let's sacrifice those for more light while keeping the lower ones'. They've got more imagery on them anyways [referring to the lower windows]. So it's kind of like finding a way of balancing those two. I think it's important to definitely keep the deep connection it has within the community but to enable the future to open up too.

This sense of compromise recognises Bellfield's status as a place of memory and connection for the community, but also its purpose as a lived-landscape that changes and evolves.

One potential solution to the confounding issue of the pews also represents this perspective of compromise between the new use and existing materiality of place. This proposal was described on multiple occasions as being one positive route for removing some pews, thus creating a more versatile space while protecting their historical and at times deeply personal significance for the community. In its most basic form, the idea is simply to let people from the community have the pews. According to one member of the board, there has already been interest even without such a plan in place.

I think that there'll be no shortage of people wanting to take them off our hands. You know, I've had a few folk asking me, 'What are you doing with the pews? When are they going to be available?' Which was good in a way because the pews will have an afterlife, if you like, which will be different to the life that they've had over the last couple hundred years or so. That will be good and I think we'll be inundated by so many people.

I met several Portobello residents who expressed this desire to keep a pew. During one of my shifts in the Bellfield administrative office, a woman stopped by simply because she wanted to visit the Celebration Hall, where her family had worshipped for generations. She showed me the exact spot where her family always sat, in a pew near the rear. Similarly, during the Doors Open Days event, one man asked if he could go to the gallery level upstairs to 'visit the family pew' they had used for over 50 years. I asked both if they would like the opportunity to keep those specific pews if given the chance, and both were strongly in the affirmative, though the man laughed and admitted that he wouldn't know where to put it. The latter returns to the notion of Bellfield as a repository for local memory and warns that such an endeavour may not be as straightforward as it first appears. There were, of course, variations of this proposal, including allowing people to cut the pews to preferred lengths or even letting local artisans turn the old wood into pieces that could be sold to raise money for Bellfield or local charities.

4.4. Discussion

To recall a quote at the start of this chapter, a building can be understood ‘as flight, as movement, as a series of transformations’ (Latour and Yaneva 2008: 80). From the day in 1807 when the village of Portobello was offered a pleasant piece of farmland by the sea on which to establish a place they could come together according to the needs of the time, to 6 September 2017 when keys were handed over to a new community body intent on creating a vibrant community hub, the place known today as Bellfield continues to evolve. Now Action Party are engaged in a continual process of place-making through their engagements with the former church.

The creation of Bellfield from the former parish church is an act of reuse, more specifically it is the generation of a new identity from an inherited material and mnemonic landscape as encountered, navigated, and recontextualised by Action Party. This secondhandedness of place is valued for its perpetuation of social memories that strengthen and define the community, yet it is also a source of frustration as it at times confounds attempts to define and utilise spaces. This is particularly evident in the Celebration Hall, home to Christian material culture in the forms of stained glass, memorials, and furnishings. The heritagisation of religion allows for their incorporation into the community hub as historically significant, aesthetically valuable, and more universally accessible—as material traces of Bellfield’s ongoing life as a centre of local activity.

Notions of community and place are materialised through the work of reusing the former church, with attention to embodied engagements in particular offering a deeper understanding of these ongoing processes. Inclusivity and sustainability emerged as particularly important pillars of Bellfield’s mission, reflected in the hosting of increasingly diverse events and Action Party’s commitment to materially engaging in green initiatives—such as the installation of solar panels and a community garden—for a healthy and sustainable Portobello. In maintaining this new garden and other green spaces, painting doors, hanging signage, and many other activities, the volunteers of Action Party engage with Bellfield in meaningful, embodied ways that transform their efforts into this shared place of enduring significance.

Chapter 5. Case Study 2: Clachan Church



Figure 33. Clachan Church (Photo by Clachan Lochbroom Heritage Trust)

5.1. ‘In a parish so extensive, so scattered, and so difficult’: A history of Clachan Church

According to local residents, the place where the River Broom empties into the head of Loch Broom, on the northwest coast of Ross and Cromarty in the Highland Council Area, has been an important site of activity since the Bronze Age. Built in 1817, Clachan Church is the latest ecclesiastic structure to manifest this deep significance, and its transfer to community ownership almost 200 years later in 2018 testifies to the enduring nature of this relationship between people and place. The seemingly simple building pictured above is an increasingly complex intersection of Scottish and Diaspora identities, Highland narratives, heritage, landscape, and community, around which my later analyses will be focused. This chapter presents my case study of Clachan Church and begins with an historical overview of the church, its setting, and how it came to be owned by the community in the form of Clachan Lochbroom Heritage Trust (CLHT or ‘the Trust’).

The earliest known reference to an ecclesiastic structure at the head of Loch Broom is found in the report of a 1227 gathering of regional clergy, though it is estimated that Christianity arrived in the region much earlier through the Irish missionary Maelrubua at the end of the 7th century (MacLeod 2017: 1). What may have existed in the area of the current church prior to incursions by Christianity was discussed during a meeting I conducted with CLHT trustees in 2019.

Paul: Well, in pre-Christian times it was a place of worship.

Leah: There's possibly a pre-Christian site of worship there, because Christian churches tended to go on pagan sites.

Paul: Build on what was already there.

Leah: Yes. And there's two Iron Age forts up Lochside, and there's been some finds and things.⁸¹ So there was and has always been a very active community there, around the end of the loch.

Siobhan: Bronze Age finds, as well.

While the veracity of these claims of pre-Christian worship on the site may require further archaeological study to confirm, the power of this continuity narrative emerges in the upcoming discussion of the community buy-out and is a feature of analyses presented later in the chapter. For my purposes here, I accept these claims of pre-Christian worship or spirituality on the site as both accurate and important for my informants. It is worth noting that two Bronze Age cairns with evidence of burial and cremation practices were found just east of the church, giving weight to local claims activity in the area (McKeggie 2021: 8).

It is not until 1601 that another surviving description confirms the presence of a church: 'Clachan Loch Bruyne with a kirk upon Can Loch Bruyne, upon the waterside is Achalunachan, 2myl thence is Achadrenie' (MacLeod 2011: 24).⁸² The origins of the 'Clachan' name here appear somewhat muddled. One local historian describes the word as meaning 'stone church' (ibid.: 75), whilst architectural guides and historical studies of Gaelic

⁸¹ These 'Iron Age forts' are several brochs—drystone Iron Age structures—found along the western edge of Loch Broom, an area known as Lochside (MacLeod 2011: 1).

⁸² Over the centuries, historical records also name Lochbroom and Loch Broom as: Lochbraon, Lochaidh Bhraoin, Lochbrune, Lochbreyne, Loch Bruyn, Loch Brein, and Loch Bruyne (MacLeod 2011). For clarity in modern usage, Loch Broom refers to the sea loch and Lochbroom to the surrounding area or historically to the former Parish of Lochbroom. The description of a 'kirk upon Can Loch Bruyne' seems to suggest that there may have been an Iron Age broch at the site of the church, as the word 'Can' comes from an Old Norse description for the shape of brochs. This usage can still be seen in place names, such as Dun Canna (Watson 1904). This would confirm local claims of a material history at the site of Clachan Church in pre-Christian times.

life use the word to mean a small informal community of dwellings (see: Fairhurst & Petrie 1964; Stevens and Wilson 2015; Gearóid 2016). Regardless, both definitions are apt in this context and explain why this word is not an uncommon feature of small settlements across the Highlands. There is, for example, another Clachan Church built in 1817 on the Applecross peninsula between the mainland and the Isle of Skye. Unless otherwise stated, ‘Clachan’ is used in reference to the church at this particular site.

Further documentation of the site remains scarce, though in 1650 one record states that the Presbytery—the court of elders representing area Church of Scotland congregations—visited the church and were displeased to learn that ‘the Act of Assembly forbidding burials inside churches was not being observed and the minister and elders were ordered regarding this’ (MacLeod 2011: 27). This implies there were burials within the earlier church and that its leadership was not keeping pace with the tumultuous theological changes of the period, as described in Chapter Two. A surviving description of this church finally appears in 1663, when the minister notified the Presbytery of his departure because ‘the Kirk of Lochbroom was unthatched’ and unsuitable for use. As local historian Kenneth MacLeod concludes, references to subsequent ministers indicate that the building must have been made usable again (ibid.: 75).

The question now is who used this original church? As the map on the following page shows, the historical parish of Lochbroom was expansive, with an area of 413^{2/3} square miles making it the third largest in the country (Groome 1885). One 18th century minister writes that ‘upon the whole, the surface of this parish yields an agreeable variety of hill and dale, wood and water, corn and grass’ and had a population of 2,211 by 1755 (Macrae 1790). These people were described as ‘Gaelic speaking and [they] had cattle, sheep and goats. They bred horses, wove and fished’ (MacLeod 2011: 23). The population is also described as ‘in general very poor’ (Ross 1835; see also: Macrae 1790). Historical maps, such as those in the *Blaeu Atlas of Scotland* from 1654, can be used to identify settlements like Logy, Ardchernich, Balblair, and Glastullich, and there are records of a castle established in the 11th century at Balloan, now Inverbroom, just south of the church (The Highland Council 2023).⁸³ The site of the castle eventually became Inverbroom House, which was rebuilt

⁸³ Maps also trace variations in place name spellings, as demonstrated earlier regarding the many versions of ‘Loch Broom’. For example, ‘Logy’ in the 1654 map is ‘Loggie’ in John Thomson’s 1832 *Atlas of Scotland* and its current spelling.

twice following devastating fires, and ‘no trace of the [earlier] structure seems to have survived’ at the current Victorian era Inverbroom Lodge (ibid.). The largest area settlement until the end of the 18th century was the township of Inverlael, established in the 13th century and located immediately east of the church, just over the River Broom where the River Lael meets the loch (Ullapool Museum 2020a). These communities were located on large estates including Cromarty, Dundonnell, Inverbroom, and Braemore, and were owned by wealthy families (see: Groome 1885; Bangor-Jones 1994; Ullapool Museum 2020b).



Figure 34. Map of Lochbroom Parish. Clachan Church is located at “Inverbroom” in square 35 (Reproduced with the permission of the National Library of Scotland)

One of the most significant events in the history of the parish occurred in 1773 with the departure of the *Hector* bearing emigrants to Canada. This was during a period from the late-18th to mid-19th century known as the Highland Clearances, where ‘driven by the economic ideology of ‘Improvement’, the Clearances involved the removal of the small tenantry from their traditional land holdings on many estates throughout the Highlands and Islands so that the land could be opened up for large-scale sheep farming’ (Basu 2006: 13; see also: Mathieson 2000; Richards 2012). It was during this time of social and economic change that many residents went abroad or to urban centres, so that at the time it was noted that ‘the population of these corners is not near so great as might be expected in such an extent of territory’ (Macrae 1790: 470). After a final communion service at the church, approximately 200 emigrants boarded nearby boats at the head of Loch Broom and rowed to the waiting ship that would be one of the first bearing a wave of Scottish emigrants to Canada. ‘They left on the “Hector” in 1773 to settle in what was described as a Paradise in Nova Scotia. They were faced with many hardships, but in spite of everything they succeeded in building a flourishing community’ that still exists today and, as will be explored later, remains connected with the current Clachan Church (MacLeod 2011: 216).

Despite this population loss, the parish grew in other ways. In 1788, The British Fisheries Society established the village of Ullapool ten miles up the loch from the church to take advantage of historically rich herring fishing in the area. The map excerpt provided on the following page presents the distance between this village and the church. A fishing community had existed here since 1596 or earlier, with approximately 22 buildings prior to the arrival of the company. Like other settlements in the expansive Lochbroom parish they would have attended church at Clachan’s predecessor (MacLeod 2011: 10). Only a few years later, one minister described the considerable growth of the village.

So that in this village there are now about 72 houses, of which 35 are slated; the rest are thatched with turf, fern roots, and heather. The principal inducement to settle in this village is its advantageous situation for the herring fishing, which indeed is very great (Macrae 1790: 464).

By 1790, the population of the parish had increased to 3,500 (ibid.). This growth is significant as the development of Ullapool into the main population centre for the region would go on to greatly affect the trajectory of the parish church.



Figure 35. Excerpt from “Northern Part of Ross and Cromarty Shires” by John Craig, 1826
(Reproduced with the permission of the National Library of Scotland)

The first half of the 19th century brought considerable changes to this expansive parish. In 1817, the current Clachan Church pictured at the start of this chapter was built upon the site of its smaller predecessor. It is described as ‘generally well attended’ with seating for 1,200 on its ground and gallery levels, while the number of those receiving communion was just over 400 (Ross 1835). Only two years later, however, the nearby township of Inverlael was purged by landowner Sir George Steuart MacKenzie.⁸⁴ The loss of Inverlael and its estimated population of at least 50 families ‘ruptured a centuries old community’ and consequently isolated Clachan from any dense population centre (Ullapool Museum 2020a; see also: Ross and Cromarty Heritage Society 2023a). Further depletion of the Clachan congregation began in 1829 with the construction of a church in the village of

⁸⁴ A 2021 study carried out by Highland Archaeology Services Limited for the Ullapool Museum’s *Lost Inverlael: Finding Balblair* project surveyed the area and identified 86 structures and numerous other features from which to learn about the long history of this community (McKeggie 2021: 2).

Ullapool as part of Thomas Telford’s government commission to construct 32 rural churches (see: Maudlin 2007). By 1831—twelve years after the ‘brutal eviction’ of nearby Inverlael (Ullapool Museum 2020a)—Clachan Church had deteriorated to the point where a portion of the roof collapsed on the congregation and many vowed they would not return (MacLeod 2011: 81).

It was during subsequent repairs that the church took on its familiar interior features, including what Gleeson Historic Building Consultants describe as an ‘extremely interesting’ layout of large, fenced communion tables down the centre of the ground floor (2014: 2).⁸⁵ The plan presented below shows this layout and indicates the placement of the upper gallery level. This layout is representative of the Church of Scotland’s position at the time regarding the sacrament of communion, where the practice of ‘fencing the table’ meant that congregants deemed worthy of receiving communion were invited within this segregated area (Marten 2016). Photos of the interior from 2018 are provided on the following page.

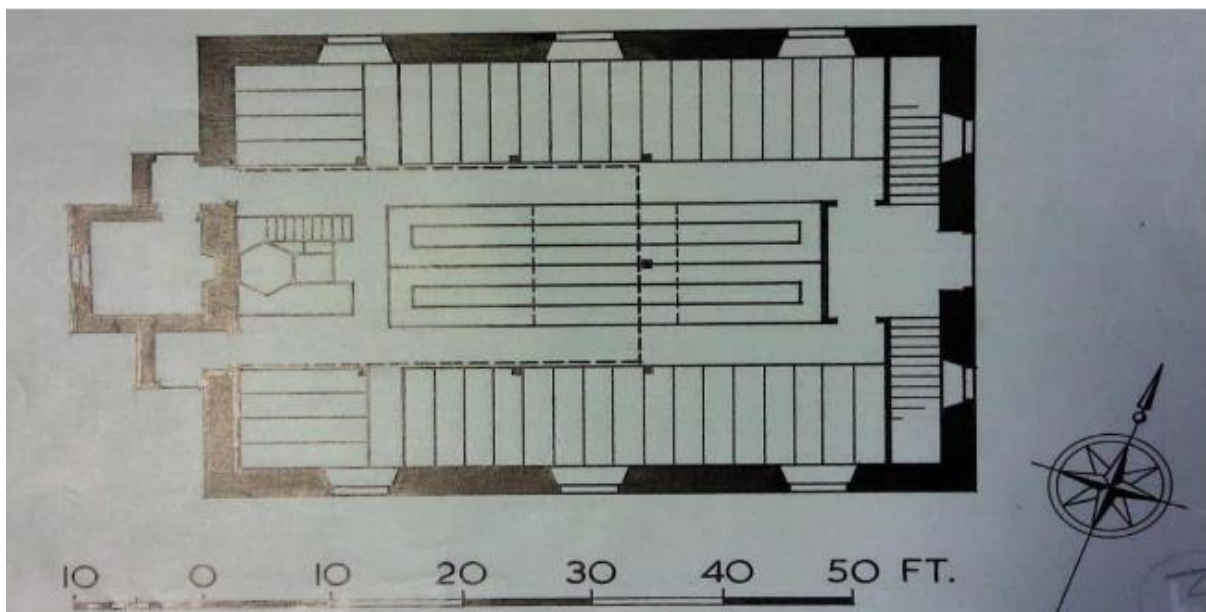


Figure 36. Clachan Church Floorplan (Gleeson Historic Building Consultants)

⁸⁵ Interesting perhaps because there are only an estimated two other surviving examples of fenced communion tables, in addition to those at Clachan Church (Marten 2016).



Figure 37. View of the ground floor and its unique fenced communion tables (Photo by Clachan Lochbroom Heritage Trust)



Figure 38. View of the upper gallery, closed off by a false ceiling since the 1950s (Photo by author)

The external appearance has remained largely the same. It is an unadorned rectangular building of two storeys, described in a modern building condition survey as ‘constructed of what appears to be random stone built in a lime mortar and set within exposed dressed stone quoins and window and door surrounds. The random and course walling is now rendered in a hard cementitious rough cast render which would originally have been a lime harling, of which some small examples may still exist’ (Gleeson Historic Building 2014: 7). Historic Environment Scotland posits that the current bellcote at the east gable, pictured below, was added at some later date (2023a). There is also an active graveyard associated with the church, which has progressively grown to surround the building on three sides.



Figure 39. Clachan Church exterior and a portion of the graveyard (Photo by author)

In 1832, Ullapool was sold by The British Fisheries Society to Sir James Matheson of Jardine Matheson & Co. for £5,250, who then let it fall into 'a sorry plight' (MacLeod 2011: 218). Such hardship was pervasive throughout the parish. It was at this time that Rev. Thomas Ross of Clachan, in his contribution to *The New Statistical Account*, a compilation of descriptions of all the parishes in Scotland, described the people of Lochbroom and 'their melancholy state of almost destitution' with regards to infrastructure, wages, education, and agricultural output and practices (Ross 1835: 87). His was 'a parish so extensive, so scattered, and so difficult' (ibid.).

Difficulties within the parish church intensified with the Great Disruption in 1843, when 450 ministers broke from the Kirk to form the Free Church of Scotland. Rev. Thomas Ross of Clachan Church was part of this schism. To reiterate from Chapter Two, this split was fuelled by perceived threats to the spiritual integrity of the Church from state involvement and the system of patronage, the latter being a process through which landlords had the authority to appoint ministers. 'In Lochbroom so many people left the Church of Scotland that the first new minister appointed (by the landlord) that autumn of 1843 left after a week or so because his congregation had almost ceased to exist' (MacLeod 2011: 67).

After the parish church survived the upheavals of the Great Disruption, it is said that 'the rot began when Clachan was disjoined from Ullapool' on 16 March 1859 (MacLeod 2018: 4). This refers to the church in Ullapool, constructed in 1829, becoming independent from the parish church. This also meant that residents of the region's main population centre were also further disjoined from Clachan. As a result, Clachan did not benefit from Ullapool's continued growth and stagnated even further in attendance, activity, and income. The fabric of the building also likely suffered as a consequence, making this 'rot' both literal and symbolic as its community and influence shrunk.

The fortunes of the historically poor parish began to improve when, in the 1890s, a new tweed mill was constructed in Ullapool. By the dawn of the First World War the village was described as vibrant and industrious, undoubtedly drawing more people from outlying hamlets throughout the parish.⁸⁶ Comparatively little is written about these small settlements; the development of Ullapool dominates discussions of area history.

⁸⁶ For more on Lochbroom and WWI, see: Fraser 1921. For WWII, see: Church 2019.

There was plenty of work for those who wanted it... all making a decent living... Those who remember the days leading up to the declaration [of WWI] speak of a crowded village – hotels and guest house full. The shooting lodge guests were all up for the ‘Glorious 12th’ and the bay was full of yachts (MacLeod 2011: 220).

The Second World War set off a period of depression and depopulation, followed by ‘an era of greater prosperity than ever before and that era has not ended yet’ (ibid.). In the 1960s and 70s, Scandinavian ships came for herring; during the Cold War Eastern European ‘klondykers’ came for mackerel; and a hospitality industry fuelled by scenic and heritage tourism has continued to grow (see: MacLeod 2011; Ullapool Harbour Trust; Ross and Cromarty Heritage Society 2023b).

Ten miles up the loch at Clachan Church, its final minister served until 1959, after which it was decided that another would routinely visit to support the small remaining congregation (MacLeod 2017: 4). It was also during the 1950s that the second-floor gallery was roofed over, as it was no longer needed for seating and this change made heating the occupied ground level more efficient. Over the following decades, activity at the church only continued to wane. I interviewed one nearby resident who summarised this final decline and pointed to Clachan’s isolation and resulting lack of an active and sizeable worshipping population as the main causes.

The problem with Clachan was that it’s not in Ullapool, and the bulk of the population is in Ullapool. Nothing happened there [at Clachan] other than the services. The services were just twice a month. And then it was funerals mostly. So there’s one minister, shuttling. And the congregation at Clachan was so small in the end. I think that’s why they decided to close the church. So those people now come into the village to worship.

After the long decline traced throughout the final pages of this section, the final steps towards closure came in quick succession.

In January of 2014, a local member of the Church of Scotland took to social media to announce that ‘our beautiful church at Clachan is facing possible closure’, as ‘costly repairs are needed which the local parish has to fund. A grant was applied for but was seemingly unsuccessful, so now the church’s future is uncertain’ (Lochbroom Parish Church 2014). At the time, it was already said that ‘many local people are worried that the church may be closed, sold for housing or even demolished’, indicating an invested community beyond the worshipping population and the potential for agitation against sale on the open market

(ibid.). Despite fundraising and awareness efforts, the financial burden of necessary repairs proved insurmountable for the long-declining place of worship and its congregation of approximately ten. In June of 2016, with the building's closure and sale seemingly inevitable, area residents began to mobilise in the form of the Friends of Clachan Lochbroom to investigate the potential for community ownership. Only a few months later, in September 2016, the decision was made to close the church. The final service was held on Sunday 20 November 2016.

5.2. The community buy-out

The unsuccessful campaign to save the church from closure laid the groundwork for the following campaign to bring it into community ownership, as the former raised awareness and began the conversation on possibly 'turning it over to the community' (Lochbroom Parish Church 2015b). For example, in 2013, when the building was not under the looming threat of closure, the Christmas service drew 53 attendees. The same service in 2014 and 2015 drew 140 and 200 respectively. As one attendee reportedly commented during the 2014 carol service, demonstrating the shift in wider awareness: 'I've driven past so many times but never been inside – it's lovely' (Lochbroom Parish Church 2015a).

Only one month after the closure of the church in November 2016, the informal Friends of Clachan Lochbroom decided to form the legal, charitable body Clachan Lochbroom Heritage Trust (CLHT or 'the Trust') to pursue purchasing the church. The organisation was officially established in June 2017 with the following objective, as recorded by the Scottish Charity Regulator (OSCR).

The organisation's purposes are: To acquire and preserve as a community asset the historic church building at Clachan, Lochbroom, Ross and Cromarty. To make the building available for any ecclesiastical purposes required by the community (e.g funeral, weddings, Christmas Carol services or special church services.) To make the building available for such community purposes as may be required and which will not conflict with the internal layout of the building or the sensitivities of the people of the area and with regard to the historic purpose of the building and its site in a burial ground (Scottish Charity Regulator 2022).

As was introduced in the Chapter Three discussion on structuring community bodies, full membership, including voting rights, is restricted to residents of the historical Lochbroom Parish while associate membership is open to all. A complex global culture of community

underpins this seemingly simple structure, an exploration of which forms an important component in the later analysis of my fieldwork for this case study.

The driving force of the work were residents of Lochside, the string of hamlets along the western side of Loch Broom which, it is important to note, are only accessible by a single road that passes directly in front of the church, making it a familiar feature of everyday life. This situation is also reflective of the church's shrinking influence, as traced throughout the earlier history. All seven on the board of trustees were residents of this area, and at least two were members of the former congregation.⁸⁷ There was of course support from Ullapool and the surrounding area, which were described to me by the trustees as 'very positive' of the buy-out. They also explained how they 'hit all the clan websites abroad' and utilised social media to raise awareness and connect with potential 'donors who had associations with the place'.⁸⁸ This relationship with the Scottish Diaspora is a particularly interesting feature of this case study, so it is addressed later in an examination of the Clachan community. In summary, the Trust is spearheaded by nearby Lochsiders with support from the surrounding area and abroad.

The Trust wrote to the General Trustees of the Church of Scotland in August 2017, 'asking for our interest in acquiring the church to be noted and acted upon' (Friends of Clachan 2017a). The CofS, in response, required quantifiable proof of community support—through membership, donations, and engagement with social media and other outlets—by November, as well as for the Trust to have ready financial resources to buy and repair the building. The property had been valued at £30,000, and the Trust were able to raise over £25,000 towards this, leaving them short of the valuation and immediate costs (e.g. insurance). Consequently, in February 2018, 'the Church of Scotland Trustees have told us this week that if we don't offer to buy now [and complete the purchase by Easter] they will put Clachan on the open market' (ibid. 2018a).

The Trust began working 'flat out', as was described to me in an interview with one member, to secure funding as the General Trustees fulfilled their threat to put the church on the market. A shop owner I met in Ullapool recalled saving tips to contribute to the effort and several trustees described this time of uncertainty during a group interview.

⁸⁷ This is as stated during a group interview with trustees on the 10th of May 2019.

⁸⁸ As of 2022, this online presence consists of a Facebook profile (Friends of Clachan Lochbroom) and a website (Clachan Lochbroom Heritage Trust).

Leah: Within a day of it going on the market someone had contacted Maury, who runs a B&B next door, and said, 'If I buy it would you run it as a hostel?' And we were like 'Woah'...

Siobhan: We panicked.

Paul: We were under pressure.

Leah: We felt we were under pressure.

A grant application with the Scottish Land Fund to help secure the purchase of the building was still ongoing, however, the Trust felt compelled to act immediately. This situation was described at the first Clachan Lochbroom Heritage Trust Annual General Meeting (AGM) in September of 2018.

We were not all that far down that road [with grant applications] and the Church decided that they would place it on the open market. So the board (of CLHT) had to decide what to do, whether to take the gamble and say 'Well nobody will be interested and our £5 will be reconsidered in due course' or not. Because the gamble obviously was that a developer might put down £30,000—of course that's peanuts to developers. Then he might take the property and say 'Well maybe in the future or something, or when it's ruined and falling down, there's a site'. So, we didn't think we could take the risk, and we purchased at £30,000.

Their offer was made on 9 March 2018 and accepted by the Church of Scotland less than one week later.

The purchase of Clachan Church by Clachan Lochbroom Heritage Trust was confirmed in June 2018. One jubilant social media post declared: '!!!!!!!!!! CLACHAN RESCUED !!!!!!!!!!! At last the purchase of Clachan for our community, at home and abroad, has been completed. What a journey it has been!' (Friends of Clachan 2018b). There were 'no more worries about a ruin on our doorstep' (Friends of Clachan 2017b). The official re-opening occurred on 22 June. When I visited the church with a trustee nearly a year later, she described the state of the building when it was re-opened: 'It'd been closed for two years, so it was a bit musty and dusty'. A detailed account of the building's internal and external condition in this period can be found in the 2014 report by Gleeson Historic Building Consultants. The photos on the following two pages show the state of the interior in 2018, which has remained largely unchanged since the buy-out.

To provide a summary on the condition of the church interior, concerns in the unused upper gallery level include sections of fallen plaster, signs of past water ingress, and cracking around the windows. While walking around with the trustee, she also pointed out small, telltale piles of powder on the floor of the gallery, indicating the presence of a woodworm infestation in the pews. On the ground floor, some stone slabs appear to be shifting, suggesting potential issues with the subfloor, and there are signs of damp and hairline cracking in the walls. Despite these deficiencies in the fabric, the building is still usable and considered watertight.



Figure 40. View of upper level interior, highlighting fallen plaster from the ceiling and cracking and staining on the wall (Photo by author)



Figure 41. View of the ground level interior (Photo by Clachan Lochbroom Heritage Trust)

Shortly after the purchase, the former chair of the Trust said, ‘This site has been used for 800 years, I believe, and we aim for another 800 years of even wider use’ (BBC 2018). Since entering community ownership in June of 2018, the Trust have continued the tradition of Christmas carols at the church, welcomed at least one wedding, held two events as part of the 2019 Highland Archaeology Festival, opened during the 2018 Lochbroom Sheepdog Trials, and participated in the national 2019 Doors Open Days festival. A series of inspections and repairs have been ongoing since the buy-out, such as the re-slatting of the roof and an asbestos survey. This chapter now proceeds to the analysis of my fieldwork for this case study, introduced by a retelling of one morning following the asbestos survey where several trustees and I made several surprising discoveries.

5.3. Clachan Church



Figure 42. Clachan Church main entrance in May 2019, when the events recounted below occurred (Photo by author)

On a sunny May morning in 2019, Leah from the Clachan Lochbroom Heritage Trust board of trustees collected me from outside my Airbnb in Ullapool—the hostel having been fully booked that night due to the ongoing Ullapool Book Festival—to visit Clachan Church together. The ten mile stretch between Ullapool and the church ran directly alongside the loch much of the way, passing a few small houses and accommodations, the pastures and rocky hillsides yellow with gorse in bloom.

‘They smell like coconut, don’t they?’ she commented as she drove. ‘You’re lucky you came while the weather is so fine. The view from the church is stunning on a clear day. Or a misty day too, really.’

We turned right and crossed a bridge over the River Broom, proceeding down a single-track road lined with mature trees and low drystone walls. Beyond the wall to our left was a thicket of young trees, to our right a green pasture dotted with sheep. At a

crossroads, we followed a sign pointing to Clachan and the string of hamlets beyond it: Letters, Ardindrean, Rhiroy, and Loggie. This half mile stretch of single-track road was lined with low hedges and passed between pastures as it pointed straight towards the loch, presenting a dramatic view between the hills. 'Failte gu Loch Bhraoin – Welcome to Loch Broom' a street sign read as we arrived. We were not alone; a few sheep and lambs roamed in front of the building, unbothered as the car came to park on the grass beside them. We got out and walked up the turf ramp to the deep red double doors leading into the church.

The unusual pale green walls and rich, warm-toned wood furnishings of the church were familiar to me now, however, on this occasion as we entered the building we noticed circular outlines roughly a handbreadth across at various places in each wall. Leah explained how an asbestos survey had been conducted since the last time she visited. This inherently destructive survey had involved removing round plugs of plasterboard and investigating for the presence of asbestos. There was some risk of asbestos, as renovations were done in the 1950s when use of the potentially dangerous material was popular, though luckily we would later learn that none was found. As we wandered towards the rear of the building, we felt compelled to investigate what might be behind one of these holes.

My audio recorder was on to capture our conversation as we moved through the building, and as we investigated the survey hole to the left of the pulpit, at the back of the church, it recorded reactions to our unexpected discovery upon removing one of the plugs and looking inside the wall.

'There's paper behind there. Oh my God, there's newspaper there,' Leah said as she shone the flashlight of her mobile phone into the void in the wall.

At that moment, another trustee arrived. 'So, is everything alright now after the asbestos survey?' Nicholas asked as he walked over, presumably because we were gathered around one of the holes.

'Oh, yeah. I just found a newspaper. That was amazing....' Leah was now focused on trying to gently remove the paper. 'It's stuck in here. An old newspaper would be really interesting to see. If I could get it out...'

'That might be a form of conservation,' Nicholas commented as he watched Leah successfully pull out a crumpled paper about the size of a fist, yellowed with age and gritty with dust. Then another. She handed these to me, and when my hands were full I passed them over to Nicholas, until we had nearly half a dozen.

“Perhaps we should pull all the walls down and see what might be back there,” he said, chuckling. We began carefully smoothing out the papers, which were the size of book pages or leaflets.

‘Is there a date on it? It feels like old paper.’ Leah held up a flattened sheet to read it. ‘It’s obviously a church publication, I think.’

‘This one looks like a page from a Gaelic book,’ I said, handing mine to Leah.

‘Oh yeah, wow. I need to take this to a Gaelic reader.’

‘February 1955,’ Nicholas said as he finally located a date. ‘What was the state of this place in 1955?’

‘That was when they covered up the gallery,’ I offered. ‘There may have been other works and they stuffed these in at the time.’

Leah had a paper in each hand and was turning them over to scan the text on each side. ‘Yeah, yeah, wow. I’m amazed.’ At this point another trustee arrived and she held up her pages for him to see. ‘We’ve just found these stuck into the wall here behind this hole the asbestos man took out. 1955. Seems to be a church publication. And then there’s a couple of pages that are in Gaelic.’

After this discovery, I began to wander on my own. While passing through the vestry door, on the other side of the pulpit, I noticed what appeared to be the faint outline of a tall ship. ‘Have you seen this on the door here?’ I called over to Leah. ‘There’s a boat.’

She came over to look at the door. ‘Oh, I’ve never seen that before. Oh my gosh,’ she said. A fourth trustee, Siobhan, had just arrived and was walking over to us. Leah waved for her to hurry. ‘She’s found a boat.’

‘It could be the *Hector*,’ Siobhan said as she joined us. As a former member of this congregation, it was notable that she was not aware of the image.

‘Right, it might be that,’ Leah agreed. ‘People have carved into the pews. You know, names into the pews. Which is another reason why it would be nice to keep them.’

Nicholas joined us in examining the door, saying it would be amazing if that was the case. We traced the sails, a flag, and speculated about whether a row of shapes along the length were windows or gunports. There also appeared to be a large word in faint cursive script just above the ship.

Leah shook her head and chuckled. ‘I’ve never even noticed it, even though we’re in and out of here all the time.’



Figure 43. Trustees carefully handle artefacts from wall (left) and the outline of a tall ship and faint cursive script on vestry door (right) (Photos by author)

Though brief, this visit to Clachan Church introduces many of the themes that structure the following analysis of my fieldwork. From the importance of the *Hector*, a key piece of history intrinsically bound to Clachan and narratives of local and Diaspora identity, to experiences of the surrounding landscape and a sense of significance in names carved into the pews and thus made part of the very materiality of this place. Perhaps most importantly, it introduces the people involved as keenly interested in engaging with the building and its history. This is explored later as having a far-reaching influence on the formation and articulations of the Clachan community and its relationship with this place. With the history of the church and its recent buy-out by Clachan Lochbroom Heritage Trust established, this chapter proceeds to an analysis of this Clachan community.

5.3.1. A global community

‘You are the owners of this building,’ the chairman announced as he opened the first Annual General Meeting of Clachan Lochbroom Heritage Trust in 2018. There were approximately 20 people present, gathered on pews in a rear corner of the sanctuary, near the pulpit. These were full members, those with voting rights within the organisation as per the legal structure of the Trust and its established geographic boundary of Lochbroom Parish. According to the secretary in a conversation a few minutes prior, there were approximately 100 full members at this time. Associate membership was open to all others, domestic and abroad. While these were all local members, the diversity of those involved became increasingly apparent as the meeting progressed.

Accents amongst the crowd revealed some origins far from this corner of rural Scotland, and comments over the course of the nearly two-hour long meeting created a picture of a membership with diverse professional and spiritual backgrounds, as well as differing perspectives on how Clachan should materially evolve under community ownership.⁸⁹ The gathered crowd was dynamic and multi-faceted, embodying overlapping notions of value and relationships with this place. Yet this crowd only represented part of the Clachan community, as members of the Scots Diaspora have also been involved—a fact presented during the AGM as an important dimension of Clachan’s identity going forward. The nature of this Clachan community has thus become increasingly complex since the decline of its original worshipping population.

This section explores the character and articulation of the Clachan community, particularly with regards to the buy-out and relationships between people and place since then. Chapter Three established the conceptual difficulty and ‘slippery’ nature of the term *community* by exploring the formation of community bodies capable of taking ownership of former churches like Clachan (Cohen 1985: 7). As notions of community are central to the work of the trust—done, as they describe, for ‘our community at home and abroad’ (Friends of Clachan 2018b)—and how people relate to Clachan as a place of significance, an analysis of this global network is imperative to understanding this case study. By considering the

⁸⁹ The issue of tensions between ‘incomers’ and ‘locals’ did not emerge as a point of particular concern during my fieldwork, though a dedicated focus or shift in topic perspective may provide additional insights into this dynamic. For more on the subject in Scotland, see: Basu 2006; Jones 2006; 2010; 2012; Woolvin 2016.

Clachan community as an identification with place and evolving product of the community-buy-out, this section presents a dynamic framework for understanding individuals involved with this project. As the AGM described above demonstrated, there are many dimensions of this community that could be the focus of additional research with regards to involvement in church reuse, such as religious affiliation or 'incomers' and 'natives'. For my purposes here, I focus on the dimensions of this community most commonly referred to by the Trust themselves, namely local residents and the global Scots Diaspora.

Local community

As described previously, the core of this community are individuals who live near Clachan on Lochside. These are individuals whose connections with this place are through use of the church or familiarity with it as a result of general proximity. Prior to conducting fieldwork, I assumed this local community would be rooted in Ullapool, as it is the largest area settlement and was home to the trust's official address at the time. However, upon visiting Clachan and interviewing various stakeholders, it quickly became apparent that while some Ullapool residents are involved and the village seems to support the buy-out, energy for the campaign and now the ownership of Clachan emerged from the small string of Lochside hamlets located beyond the church. One trustee explained this dynamic in an interview.

It does tend to be mostly Lochsiders, or ex-Lochsiders, or people whose families came from Lochside. But I think people in Ullapool, they have supported us and been very encouraging, but they have their own things. You know, they've got their own entertainment there. So to get them to come out to Lochside sometimes it can be quite difficult.

The map on the following page visualises this distance, showing the church in relation to surrounding settlements. Recalling the history of Clachan, it was disjoined from the population at Ullapool in 1859, and this historic reshaping of its community is still reflected today as all CLHT trustees at the time of this research resided in Lochside. Consequently, when referring to this local community, it may encompass the large expanse of the former Lochbroom Parish but it is primarily concentrated in the closest settlements.



Figure 45. Clachan Church shaped donation box and accompanying text at an Ullapool shop (Photo by author)

Reasons for this local community coming together around Clachan are addressed more thoroughly in other sections—from continuity of use to heritage value, local amenity, and its place in local identity narratives—so what I will focus on here is the unique relationship between people and this place, where the church itself has become a member of the community and the buy-out reflects values Lochsiders described as extending to each other. Initial hints at this neighbourly relationship emerged during a group interview with several trustees, when I asked why they felt motivated to act. One woman not affiliated with the Kirk explained the reasoning behind her involvement.

Just.... because it's on Lochside. We are all Lochsiders on the board.
That's a bad thing, in some respects, we should extend out. But it was our local church.

The depth of this relationship did not become clear until several days later, during an informal conversation with a nearby resident as we drove down the single-track road through the Lochside settlements.

Up on Lochside the caring attitude of people is amazing. It's the same with Ullapool, but maybe even moreso up here, because you have to rely on your neighbours more and there's still that sort of Gaelic thing about hospitality and being welcoming and everyone helps everyone out. There's several old people who would probably have to be in homes if neighbours didn't help them out. You'll often see peoples' cars outside the older folks' houses. They stop by to have a wee chat with them so they have a social life and everything as well. It's brilliant. A bit like the church, actually. It's this wee old man who let himself go a bit and now he needs some help keeping the lights on.

Here the church is likened to elderly native Lochsiders who are cared for by their neighbours. When discussing such individuals later in this same conversation, there was an emphasis on their value as local history-keepers, similar to Clachan's role as a historic place, including how 'One guy knows the history of the area but when he's gone it'll all be gone.' As we passed by one older woman's house, it was commented that 'She's got all the history of Lochside at her fingertips. Who lived where and who did what to who.' Working to support the church when it was threatened with closure or loss can be seen as an extension of that same commitment to neighbourly support.

The transformation of place into a member of the community is reminiscent of comments by nineteenth century architectural writer John Ruskin, who declared that buildings, having reached a certain age and possessing 'that golden stain of time', can achieve 'language and life' equal to those of 'the natural objects of the world' (1849: 177). Directly east of Clachan on the opposite coast, ethnographic research revealed how the Hilton of Cadboll cross-slab, a 9th century monument with Pictish symbols, is 'conceived of as a living member of the community' (Jones 2005: 44). As a member of that community, the slab is 'acting as a mechanism for the negotiation of personal identities and relationships' and 'provides a mechanism for the symbolic construction of community', similar to what this chapter aims to demonstrate regarding Clachan (ibid.: 45).

International community

The Scots Diaspora is a prominent facet of the Clachan community. Internal discourse on the nature of their community frequently makes a point to reference this global cohort, as in the announcement that ‘At last the purchase of Clachan for our community, at home and abroad, has been completed’ (Friends of Clachan 2018b). Because my research was located at Clachan and the Diaspora are by nature elsewhere, what I will focus on here are interpretations and perspectives of locals regarding their distant yet important community members, aided by correspondence from the Diaspora and existing research related to their experiences of Scotland. To understand this unique dimension of the Clachan community, the remainder of this section will establish how and why the Diaspora is part of this community identity and the relationship between this dispersed global population and Clachan as project of community ownership.

The Trust deliberately cultivated a community that encompasses the Scottish Diaspora, and one reason for this was to secure a wider base for funding and support of the initial buy-out. As explained in Chapter Three, rural locations such as Clachan may face greater difficulties in raising funds compared with urban ones. The 2018 AGM I attended opened with a summary of the campaign, including how they initiated and expanded up global connections early in the campaign.

Immediately our activities were to do with raising money in order to buy the building and trying to increase awareness. We have again tried to tap into Scots emigrants in Canada, North America, Australia and so on, and there is some beginnings of success with that. But we have to redouble our efforts on that.

One example of this success was The Clan Mackenzie Society of Canada putting out a news alert after being contacted about the buy-out. ‘CALLING ALL MACKENZIES WORLDWIDE – *Cuimhnichibh na domaine bho’n d’thainig sibh* (remember those from whence you came!)’ the article began before explaining the appeal for funding (2017). Beyond such pragmatic financial motives necessitated by pressure to quickly purchase the building, there already existed a positive relationship between the Diaspora and the local area community.

Prevailing local sentiments view the Diaspora as a natural extension of the local community, and Clachan, with its prominent position in the local narrative of depopulation and change through association with the *Hector*, serves as a place where this relationship is made tangible, testifying to and anchoring this global community. This perspective of including the Diaspora as part of the Clachan community was in place since the start of the trust, as one informant explained.

We were always getting visitors from the Diaspora already. So I just thought, 'Well there's things we can do if we were to take on the church'. You know, we want it, we need it. And the population is growing, I mean, along the Lochside we've got double the number of houses occupied now. So it's an opportunity for everyone in our community, those who are here all the time and those just visiting.

Clachan's role in this sense of community was evident in the retelling of a day when a Clan MacLennan descendent and her husband visited from Australia as part of a global clan gathering in Inverness.

There were some tears as they got closer to the lives of their ancestors here and were able to imagine them attending services at Clachan and being baptised here (Friends of Clachan 2018c).

Reflecting on the experience, one trustee concluded that visiting Clachan was an act of "coming home". It really does bring home to us that we are a very, very large family, and full of goodwill' (ibid.). This 'large family' includes the Diaspora, whom the trust welcome 'home' through experiencing Clachan.

The community buy-out has since strengthened and expanded this existing relationship. The establishment of the Trust and its active presence on social media continues to attract interest from members of the Diaspora, particularly in Nova Scotia, Canada, where many passengers from the *Hector* settled and Lochbroom regional influences are still clearly present today (see: McCulloch House Museum; Hector Heritage Quay). Though, as the earlier Australian example demonstrates, the connections are indeed global in scale. News coverage (see: SPP Reporter 2017; BBC 2018) and communications amongst this global cohort, such as the Clan Mackenzie article above, are also raising awareness. One impactful engagement with the Diaspora in Pictou County, Nova Scotia was recounted during a meeting with the trustees.

The Gaelic class in Pictou [Canada]... They've read our Facebook and got in touch and sent us a fundraising book of recipes, which included stories and things in Gaelic from the people who've gone there in 1773. You know, they're descendants. It's still very much... they've got a Lochbroom Church and a *Hector* replica. So they are aware of us. Also, on their 'descendants of the *Hector*' website they've taken an article from us. So we are in connection. We are in contact with them.

Such increased dialogue led, at the time of my fieldwork, to plans of 'sistering'—that being the formation of a partnership that may take any number of forms, similar to official Sister City status (see: Sister Cities International 2022)—Clachan with the Loch Broom Log Church in Pictou County in a highly symbolic gesture of community.⁹⁰ This is particularly significant as the Log Church, though a 1973 replica of the original 1787 building constructed by Scottish immigrants, is also 'a treasured historical site' being repaired to better serve its community as an active heritage place (Loch Broom Log Church Committee 2023).

Clachan's status as a community place also encourages visitation and meaningful, embodied connections with place by members of the Diaspora. 'One woman from Canada got in touch saying she would be traveling through the area while on holiday doing the North Coast 500', one trustee told me.⁹¹ 'She learned about what we're doing and was wondering if she could stop by. Just to experience it for herself.' While not my focus here, as I did not encounter anyone visiting from abroad, the nature and powerful impact of embodied experience for members of the Diaspora is explored at lengths by Basu, who accompanied international individuals on their journeys through the Highlands (2002; 2005; 2006). It is beneficial to consider perceptions of these experiences by the local community, as they facilitate these connections and, as the voting membership, control the building. They are aware of the impactful nature of physically experiencing place, as the earlier anecdote about the visiting Australian couple shedding 'some tears as they got closer to the lives of their ancestors here' at Clachan was from the perspective of a local resident.

⁹⁰ There is little available research on international heritage site partnerships, particularly at the level of such relatively small-scale grassroots endeavours like Clachan. If this relationship were to move forward, it would be a valuable perspective on international partnerships and community-building.

⁹¹ The North Coast 500 is a 516 mile route tracing the coastlines of northern Scotland. It was established in 2015 by the Tourism Project Board of the North Highland Initiative (NHI) to encourage travel through the region (North Coast 500: 2023).

The graveyard is worth individual consideration as it is a particularly potent source of connection for members of the Diaspora, both those who visit Clachan in person and those abroad. According to the Trust, even prior to the buy-out, 'Every year someone amongst us will meet visitors from abroad who have come to find and look after their relatives' graves' (Friends of Clachan 2016b). As a result, the Trust created a public genealogy project, 'photographing all the gravestones in Clachan's burial ground and placing this archive onto our Facebook site' and website (ibid.). Visiting the graveyard is a particular form of roots tourism, defined by Paul as 'cultural heritage trips, in which participants seek out an embodied experience of culture and connection' (2016: 199). It represents 'a close bond between blood and soil' reinforced by encountering the final resting places of family progenitors who have quite literally become one with the homeland, anchoring the family identity with the site (Basu 2005: 146). As Clachan is surrounded on three sides by an active graveyard still used by the local community, it can also be viewed as a site of shared remembering, bringing together past and present connections in one place.

Clachan is thus a place that brings together current residents and descendants of emigrants, their differing experiences and relationships with the church representing some of the ways in which a place may be valued, as well as how communities form around and through the reuse of churches, particularly in rural Highland locales with dispersed local populations. One trustee explained how Clachan is 'not just a community space', but something more.

One thing we found out when we started this is that there's interest from these people who were once from the land here and were sent to foreign lands. It's not just a community space like our nice new village hall down in Braemore where you can play music and whatnot. I think we need to consider what this space could be and what it means to many people in the world because we are unique in having this global community and deep connections with the area here.

Since entering community ownership through Clachan Lochbroom Heritage Trust, the church has become part of an increasingly large and engaged global 'family' as a result of its long presence and association with the Diaspora. However, this significant place cannot be separated from the historically and emotionally charged landscape in which it is located. The following section considers the impact of the Highland landscape on experiences of Clachan.

5.3.2. 'Whether it's glorious or dreich': Landscape and place

While attending a conference in England on the subject of church reuse, one presenter disparaged the 'simple boxes' of Highland churches, a result of what was described as the 'aggressive distribution of churches in Scotland'. These churches were presented as empty places, and value—both academic and architectural—was portrayed as tied to ornamentation and grand architectural forms more commonly found in other styles of church architecture. This interpretation and subsequent dismissal of Highland churches lacked denominational, regional, and sociocultural nuance, and as the lone speaker representing Scotland it was not surprising that several female attendees sought me out during a break in the day's events to express their disagreements with what they had heard.

'It's more of a Celtic theology in the Highlands rather than a Catholic one,' a woman explained. She was from the Highlands originally but had moved to southern England many years earlier. She elaborated on 'Celtic theology' as meaning, in her view, a greater involvement of the dramatic natural landscape in religious life. With her use of 'landscape' referring generally to the natural setting. The Presbyterian disposition regarding the material explored in Chapter Two may be seen in this perspective as well. 'The simple inside allows for reflection on the beauty outside. It creates a space for profound experiences.'

'The beauty of the landscape is brought inside,' another woman offered. 'You don't need all the useless gilding and fancy columns when you're surrounded by the beauty of creation. Sure, there was also poverty involved, but this profound connection to the landscape is still there and always has been.' She paused. 'And hopefully it always will be.'

The above comments on the importance of the natural landscape in Highland religious life are echoed by Edinburgh theologian Michael Northcott, who describes a 'joyful exaltation in the beauty and freedom of the high land' even amidst 'a struggle for survival against the often hostile elements of wind and rain' (2015: 105). The description of this as a 'Celtic theology' seems to imply an indigenous or innate origin predating the import of Christianity to the region, or perhaps an appropriation of earlier relations with the land into this unique form of Christianity. Regardless, the result is, as Northcott explains, that 'the combinations of gratitude and struggle, gaiety and suffering mark Highland culture and religion' (ibid.). What the women at the conference described in religious terms can be understood as a wider cultural phenomenon, explaining why expressly non-religious

members of the Trust also spoke of the significance of the surrounding landscape, as this section will demonstrate.

There is a strong relationship between the wider setting of the church and understandings of Clachan, which influence the experiences and perspectives of my informants. This section explores this relationship by considering the surrounding landscape as both a physically encountered domain and a powerful mnemonic device. *Landscape* however, is a term that requires some unpacking, as Ingold explains, because ‘it is not “land”, it is not “nature”, and it is not “space”.’ Rather, ‘landscape is qualitative and heterogeneous’, comprised of all features and objects (2000: 190). For my purposes, the landscape is the wider setting in which the church is situated. A focus on the landscape inverts the usual significance of churches, from an emphasis on what is inside to what lies beyond. From what is conducted within and expands out into the community to what surrounds and is brought inside in the form of lighting, views, and other embodied phenomena. For example, Clark uses the term ‘special shell’ to describe how ‘memories are embodied in church buildings’, representing a common inward focus where generations of activities and experiences within the church as a discrete ‘shell’ are the primary source of its significance (2007: 59). This section now considers the setting pictured below as a physical and mnemonic domain that suffuses Clachan with meaning and makes it a feature of the landscape itself.



Figure 46. View of the surrounding landscape, looking towards Loch Broom (Photo by author)

Physical domain and mnemonic device

The surrounding landscape is a considerable source of Clachan's significance. While meeting with several trustees around a table at an Ullapool cafe, I asked what they liked most about the church, intentionally making the question broad so as to not limit their responses. Beyond just a focus on the landscape, they provided examples of how it was experienced in relation to Clachan.

James: Oh it's location, location, location for me. It could be anything, but it's where it is to me that makes it special.

Siobhan [former Clachan congregant]: Yeah, the views. I mean, when you're sitting in the pew, should you look out the window instead of concentrating on the sermon, you get fantastic views. You're just looking up at the mountains, you know, looking along the loch. The landscape just draws you in.

James: It's a lovely drive, too.

Leah: I went to a funeral there once. We were standing in the churchyard and it was crystal blue skies. It was cold. They were interring the body and I just looked up at the hill, and then that way down the loch, and just thought, 'This would not be a bad place to spend eternity.'

Paul: There's a famous painting by a Glasgow colourist... it's called 'The Highland Funeral'. It shows the loading of a coffin onto a horse drawn cart. And it's reap day. And having been to a few funerals and standing in the graveyard, it just brings it back. It really does. The whole evocative feel of the weather and the location and just the landscape as a whole.

Siobhan: Yeah, whatever the weather, whether it's glorious or dreich.

Paul: Two sides of the same coin.

This conversation illustrates how the surrounding landscape is encountered at Clachan as both an experiential domain—the hills, cold air and clear skies, a stretch of rural road—and 'evocative' mnemonic device, which contribute to the significance of this place.

When Siobhan described looking out the windows in the above interview, this could be described as not just her looking outside, but the light and the view coming inside as well. The large windows play an important role in experiences of the church, as was described during the same group interview referenced above.

MM: Do you have any spaces or features of the church that you're particularly fond of?

Siobhan: It's the windows. It's the light. It's the proportions, they're so elegant.

Leah: It's the feel.

Siobhan: And the amount of light you get. And so it makes that feeling, doesn't it? I mean, you get fresh flowers on all the windowsills and immediately it's alive and it's really...

Leah: We added daffodils and spring flowers. We just put them there for the funeral just to make it a bit more homely. And it looked lovely, didn't it, with all the light coming through the window?

Mentions of fresh flowers often accompanied those of pleasant lighting, both of which bring the place 'alive' and make it feel 'homely' through a connection to the landscape outside. Another individual poetically described how 'autumn-coloured flower arrangements in the windows caught the sunlight and brought warmth to our memories of neighbours who are no longer with us, to whom Clachan was so important' (Friends of Clachan 2016a). These are examples of 'encounter as affectively charged', where experiences elicit a 'feeling', as repeatedly referred to in the interview (Tolia-Kelly et al. 2017: 7).

Drawing my attention outward to consider Clachan's surroundings, described by one speaker as 'evocative', the landscape also acts as a powerful mnemonic device that generates a unique sense of place at Clachan, which 'may be experienced as if it were emitted from or dwelt in place itself, *an animus loci*' (Basu 2002: 340). During the Trust's first AGM in 2018, one local historian said with great reverence: 'There have been religious services on this land since at least twelve hundred and twenty eight,' emphasising each number of this date. 'We don't know what they did back then. We don't have records. It may not have ever been consecrated by the Kirk. But the place has been consecrated by time.' As with the conversation quoted earlier on Bronze Age archaeological finds in the area, the significance of Clachan is rooted in human activity during the far distant past. Though many details from the long centuries predating the current building are unknown, they are still 'encountered and intuited in the landscape itself' (Basu 2006: x).

This sense of human continuity embodied in the landscape was a motivating factor for the formation of the Trust and the community buy-out of Clachan, as expressed during a meeting with the trustees.

Leah: And there's two Iron Age forts up Lochside, and there's been some finds and things. So there was a very active community there

Siobhan: Bronze Age finds, as well, yeah.

Paul: That sense of continuity was threatened by the sale.

[Agreement around the table of six]

Paul: I'm not a church-goer, I'm not religious. But I feel it's important to keep that sense of continuity going, for its importance to the community.

James: Summed it up perfectly.

This notion of continuity emerges because, as Ingold describes, 'the landscape is constituted as an enduring record of – and testimony to – the lives and works of past generations who have dwelt within it, and in so doing, have left there something of themselves' (2000: 189). The dramatic setting at the head of Loch Broom thus serves as 'a medium in which past and present become interfused' (Basu 2006: xiv). How, then, do such readings and experiences of the surrounding rural landscape influence those of Clachan as a built structure? In applying Ingold's 'dwelling perspective' to the built architectural form of Clachan, 'there can, then, be no absolute distinction between 'natural' and 'artificial' structures' meaning Clachan is itself another feature of the landscape rather than something separate (2000: 154). This explains how the sense of deep continuity emerging from the site itself suffuses the much newer building of Clachan and was thus threatened by its sale.

When considering the Highland landscape, Basu cautions that 'it should also be remembered that, since the late eighteenth century, the Scottish Highlands, with its mountains and glens, misty isles and loch-side castles, has been one of the most romanticised landscapes in Western literature, art, film and photography' (2006: 41; see also: Withers 2005). In her own description of the romanticisation of the Highlands, Jones explains how the region has become 'an icon of loss and displacement and it acts as a mnemonic device for the Clearances especially when accompanied by the remains of former settlements. Whether or not the former residents were evicted during the Clearances, these

become entangled in Clearance narratives' (2010: 123). These narratives, woven through the motives and experiences of my informants at Clachan, are the focus of the following section.

5.3.3. 'A safe ruin': Clachan Church and the absent presence of Highland history

I think they were trying to shock people by saying, 'We either sell it, or we take the roof off and make it a safe ruin.' And I think they were perhaps trying to stimulate a reaction, which it did.

–Trustee of Clachan Lochbroom Heritage Trust, 2018

This section considers the relationship between Clachan and prominent Highland narratives of absence and loss resulting from historic depopulation in the region, primarily in a period of events known as the Highland Clearances. According to members of the Trust, when the Kirk decided to close Clachan as an active church they said that if their desired price was not obtained they would have the roof removed and make the building a ruin. This threat of deliberate destruction held a unique sting for members of the surrounding community, where the familiar sight of ruined croft houses and other buildings amidst the landscape evokes a melancholy history. As one trustee said when asked why she felt motivated to help establish the Trust and take ownership of the church: 'I didn't think we needed another sad ruin'. Similarly, another recounted how, when church authorities held a public meeting to discuss the closure, people were 'galvanised into thinking that we'd like to save the church' from becoming a planned ruin. This section uses ruins and their regional significance as a starting point for exploring how conceptualisations of absence and silence are managed by community ownership of Clachan and why these are valuable perspectives in understanding such projects in the Highlands.

To understand why the prospect of the church being made inhospitable through ruination evoked a powerful response from the local community, it is necessary to establish the significance of ruins in this regional context. To do this, I will first explain how relationships with ruins in the Highlands are entangled with interpretations of a period of mass emigration by the rural poor in the late-18th to mid-19th centuries known broadly as the Highland Clearances. These population shifts were consequences of the 'Improving

Movement' and its economic ideology, which saw large estate owners remove small tenantry to reorganise the rural landscape in favour of large-scale sheep farming (see: Basu 2006: 13; Jones 2007: 162). Popular perceptions continue to hold those impacted as 'the archetypal victims of the great social and economic upheavals of eighteenth- and nineteenth- century Scotland', where 'notions of injustice and moral responsibility underpin interpretations and pepper contemporary and modern discourses', leading to highly emotive and striking presentations of the period and its consequences (Gourievidis 2010: 19).⁹²

However, the nature of the Clearances—as the period and its events are also known—is debated, with some positing that 'although there were several episodes in which people were cleared and directly embarked for overseas, it has yet to be demonstrated that, in general, the Clearances accelerated either migration or emigration' (Richards 2000: 324). Basu remarks on how the Clearances are frequently conflated with an overall trend of Highland emigration and domestic migration during the period, despite the influence of other factors, such as subsistence crises in the early 19th century and the draw of industrialised centres (2006: 13). Discussions on the matter are complex due to, as Richards explains, the Clearances becoming 'proxy' for other issues: confrontations between regions and cultures; 'the power of "capitalism" and the resistance of a romanticised agrarian oral culture'; abuses of wealthy landowners against rural peasantry; and even, as some would argue, ethnic cleansing (2007: 7). As a result of such diverse and at times conflicting interpretations, ways in which this period is remembered and presented as heritage are also contentious (Withers 2005; Richards 2007; Gourievidis 2010). Despite these debates—or perhaps due to their enduring complexity—the Clearances and their 'emotive, politically- and symbolically-charged character' remain powerfully present in regional identities and narratives of place (Gourievidis 2010: 19). As one member of the Trust succinctly described it: 'The Clearances left their marks in our minds, didn't they?'

I encountered the pervasive 'marks' left by this difficult history throughout my fieldwork in Lochbroom. The photo on the following page is just one example of several ruined houses I viewed from the road while travelling throughout the area, which serve as

⁹² This is epitomised by *The Making of the Crofting Community*, an influential presentation of the Clearances as an 'overwhelming tragedy' (Hunter 2018: 13).

material testaments to and connects with this past regardless of whether their ruined state is a product of this history or not. The flier accompanying a Clachan donation box in an Ullapool business noted the significance of the church for those who emigrated ‘to make better lives for themselves during and after the Highland Clearances in the 18th and 19th centuries, manifest in the sailing of the *Hector*.’ I also frequently came across evidence of ‘roots tourism’, explained in the previous section as genealogy inspired travel—inherently predicated on emigration—that is an increasingly ubiquitous feature of hospitality and related industries in the region (see: Basu 2006; Bhandari 2013; Paul 2016). Such evidence included targeted clan, travel, and souvenir merchandise in stores, flyers in a hostel, and stories from locals about helping tourists locate places from their distant family histories.



Figure 47. Ruined house seen on the journey to Clachan Church
(Photo by author)

In 2020, the Ullapool Museum marked the 200th anniversary of the local Inverlael Clearance with the start of a two-year project to recover ‘a lost local community’ through archaeological and archival research, accompanied by an extensive programme of public engagement and education (Ullapool Museum 2020a). To reiterate from the earlier history, Inverlael was once the largest settlement in the area and was located directly east of the church, implying a significant connection between the two though I did not encounter this as overtly stated. One local resident was quoted about his connection with that displacement, which may be generations removed but is still an impactful part of his personal story.

The evictions took place at Martinmas, in the middle of winter, to ensure the crofters wouldn't try to stay," he said. "My great, great grandparents fled to the other side of Loch Broom... and built a hovel near Clachan. There they lived off razor fish and other shellfish – mussels, whelks – which were taken from the saltings collected at low tide on the shores of Loch Broom. They would have scraped around while the potatoes that had been planted in their land rotted... It was a form of ethnic cleansing (Holden 2020).

The museum's account of the project is likewise emotive in its descriptions of the 'brutal eviction' by the MacKenzie's of Coul that 'ruptured a centuries old community' and imprinted a 'painful history' on the land that is 'now largely forgotten but hidden in plain sight' in the form of ruins and 'scraps of the social history of Inverlael' (Ullapool Museum 2020a).

These ruins, where 'huddles of stones from the old croft houses are strung out across the hillside', represent an important feature of this regional narrative (Ullapool Museum 2020a). In ethnographic studies of how people relate to the Highland landscape, Basu found that 'croft houses and the cairn-like remains of old settlement clusters that one frequently encounters in the Highlands, are often interpreted as evidence of the Clearances regardless of their age or the specific circumstances of their desertion' (Basu 2006: 154). This transforms them, in the words of 19th century architectural heritage writer Alois Riegel, into 'unintentional monuments', unmanaged mnemonic devices evoking this period of displacement and its associated ideas and emotions (1982: 21).⁹³ Jones (2012) and Robertson (2015) frame such Highland ruins as particularly important mnemonic devices at the local level, influencing social memory, identity, and notions of heritage. While I am interested in such local experiences, Clachan is a place formerly *threatened* with ruination; exploring reactions to this potential future forms part of a larger consideration on how sensations of absence and melancholy are managed at the church.

⁹³ While many Highland ruins are not interfered with and are left as they are in the landscape, some, like the ruined settlements of Rosal and Achanlochy, cleared from the Sutherland Estate, have had their significance interpreted by institutions like the Strathnaver Museum through informational panels and guided walks (Gourievidis 2010: 65).

Managing absence and preventing melancholy

As the departure point for a well-known instance of emigration and situated within an area that directly experienced depopulation during the Clearances, Clachan is firmly enmeshed in both regional and local narratives of absence, which have the power to create melancholy places. Its historical association with the *Hector* and, by extension, the Diaspora are frequently cited reasons for its significance, making notions of absence an important part of Clachan's identity. This is even more prominent now that the Trust is actively engaging with the dispersed, global population as part of its strategy of community ownership. As such, I argue that the community buy-out serves to manage absence and its potential for melancholy through the continuity of presence generated by embodied engagements with the church.

For my purposes here, *absence* refers to both the spatial, material reality of something or someone not existing in a particular place or moment, and to the evocative experience of, as Bille, Hastrup and Sorensen describe in their efforts to establish an anthropology of absence, 'sensing the presence of people, places and things that have been obliterated, lost, missing or missed, or that have not yet materialized' (2010: 3). They go on to explain how, beyond just evoking the presence of what is missing, 'absences are cultural, physical, and social phenomena that powerfully influence people's conceptualizations of themselves and the world they engage with' (ibid.: 4).

What persists at Clachan is an absence of community members, from past parishioners throughout the site's long history to emigrants whose stories of displacement and resilience still resound in the local community. This absence is perceived and thus managed through embodied engagements of the existing community with Clachan, because 'what may be materially absent still influences people's experience of the material world' just as phenomenal encounters influence perceptions of what is absent (Bille et al. 2010: 4). I witnessed one particularly strong example of this while visiting Clachan with several members of the Trust.

As we walked into the ground floor, full of dark wooden pews of a simple design and two central communion tables running perpendicular to them through the middle of the room, I noticed the woman in front of me trailing a hand along the sides of the pews as we walked down the aisle. I realised I had been doing the same. They were glossy and textured

by old scratches and dents, the edges softened with time. It was a pleasant patina that spoke of their long age and use.

‘You can’t help but touch them,’ I commented as we continued walking.

‘I know, I just love them.’ There was a sound, as if she gave a pew an affectionate little pat. ‘So many people have sat and gathered here. There’s names carved into some of the pews too,’ she said. ‘So we should keep those around somehow.’

‘It’s like they’re all still here with us, in a way.’ Someone added, having overheard. Basu describes such ‘embodied readings’ of place, where ‘the past may become present through the phenomenological encounter’, in this case both the touching of pews and the names carved into them evoked the presence of these otherwise unknown individuals (2006: xiv). By facilitating such encounters, the church generates a sense of presence that testifies to the continuity of community established as an important feature of Clachan’s identity through the work of the Trust. The threat of ruination, therefore, also threatened this sense of presence and connection facilitated by the materiality of place.

Ruins are a ‘confluence between absence and presence’, where ‘having outlived their death, the ruins occupy the spectral trace of an event left behind, serving to testify to the past through a logic of voids, disruptions, and hauntings’ (Trigg 2013: xxvii; see also: Edensor 2001; 2007; Olivier 2004). How does the ruin—a place that ‘testifies to a failed past but also reminds us that the future may end in ruin’—differ from a ‘failed’ church now experienced as a positive medium for generating presence (Trigg 2006: xxvi)?⁹⁴ I would argue that unlike ruins, Clachan as an ostensibly ‘failed’ church maintains material integrity and as a result remains accessible and in a recognisable context, allowing for the continuation of social relationships and connections.

Ruination can be considered an attempted act of disposal, with disposal also representing a process ‘in which people manage absence within social relations’ through their relationships with the materiality of place (Hetherington 2004: 157). When a place is rendered inhospitable (i.e. ‘ruined’), so too are the social connections between the extant and absent community. As Macdonald, Morgan and Fredheim describe, disposal means

⁹⁴ I use the term ‘failed church’ not to pass judgement but to reflect the sadness of closure described by one former Clachan congregant as well as recent research on the topic of church closure which finds it to be experienced ‘as a failure on their part’ (Stephenson 2015: 13). It also encompasses the inability of the active church to sustain itself financially or evade closure, which led to its potential ruin.

deselecting something from being brought into the future; there is a lack of value that extends to ‘a devaluing of a particular people, memories and histories’, which in this context represent a continuity or connection with the past (2020: 161). The ruin is a result of what Hetherington (2004) describes as incomplete or mismanaged disposal: it is a place felt to have been neglected, abandoned; where past relationships with or negotiated by place are broken or present in an unfamiliar form. Trigg describes this as an ‘anonymous materiality’, that being ‘the indifference of a place that no longer reciprocates our memories, thus instigating an aesthetic of the uncanny’ (2013: xxvi). Avoiding ruination can thus be understood as avoiding this estrangement of place and maintaining a material context in which absence can be managed through continued encounters.

By saving Clachan and its associated relationships from the above consequences of ruin, the community also prevented it from becoming a melancholy place—expressed almost directly when one trustee explained that she wanted to prevent it from becoming ‘a sad ruin’. Benjamin (2000) describes the sensation of melancholy as that which fills a place of absence—what once was, what can never be, or what remains incomplete.⁹⁵ Ruins are often associated with melancholy, whether they themselves are melancholic or their remaining fabric has the power to inspire ‘melancholy musings’ in those experiencing them (Webb 2002: 68). With its place firmly established in local history and Clearance narratives, Clachan is undoubtedly still a place of absence and thus has the potential for this unsettled sensation. This is defined by Navaro-Yashin, in her proposal for an anthropology of melancholy through the example of inhabited ruins in Turkish occupied Cyprus, as a relational process where place generates an affective sense of melancholy while individuals experience melancholia when they process their understandings and experiences (2009: 15). By managing absence through continuity of engagement with place, the potential for melancholy is also managed.

Considering Trigg’s explanation of how a sense of melancholy may emerge in even the most homely and familiar of places through silence, where ‘silence dissects, interweaves, and protrudes through these apparently enduring things, effecting a sense of melancholy in the very fact of their continued existence’, and the earlier description of melancholy as that

⁹⁵ There is also an argument for all buildings being melancholic to some extent, ‘for each building is what it is, but simultaneously is “that which is not”. The latter absence creates a feeling in all those at the site of ‘loss, a negation of what might have been’ (Dale & Burrell 2008; 291; see also: Petani & Mengis 2018).

which fills or is affected by an absence, I take the position that a relationship between *silence* and *absence* can be established. The following section explores the significance of silence and sound at Clachan as means of understanding and managing absence.

The silencing of place

The threat of ruination was also a threat of what I describe as the *silencing of place*, an exploration of which, as it relates to sensations of absence, leads to revelations on the importance of sound at Clachan under community ownership. One meaning of silence is metaphorical, as the ruin can no longer testify or 'speak' of existing social relations through the integrity of its fabric and embodied encounters with it, recalling Trigg's description of 'the indifference of a place that no longer reciprocates our memories' (2013: xxvi). Silence also describes an experiential 'material condition' where the absence of sound exists in the context of its environment (Kakalis & Dorrian 2020: 129). While considering both aspects of silence, I focus primarily on the latter, as it revealed the important role of the Clachan soundscape in developing a sense of community and place.

By now it has been established that Clachan is a place of significance as it is a familiar member of the community that provides a physical anchor for an unbroken chain of global community and emotionally evocative, tangible connections to the past. Framing the loss of the church as a threat of silencing these existing relationships with place provides a new perspective for understanding the motivations of this community. It is important to note that it was not just closure and ruination that threatened these relationships; my informants expressed dismay at the potential for conversion into housing or holiday accommodations as well. The question that arises now is how these outcomes could act to silence experiences and relationships with place whereas community ownership does not.

The primary issue was one of community access, where those outcomes deemed undesirable by my informants would make Clachan and its significance physically inaccessible. This would result in the severing of lifelong connections with place, as expressed by one trustee regarding an elderly neighbour 'I got involved because my next-door neighbour was and is a church goer. I just thought, "I want him to go off from his own church", you know.' Similarly, another explained how the church has been a 'focal point of community experience and feelings over hundreds of years', which is why the Trust is

working to make it 'available again for everything that it has always been needed for' and more.

I now turn to the experience of silence to understand the role of sound, and particularly music, at Clachan as a community place. One prominent thread of Highland narrative is its emptiness resulting from historic periods of depopulation and the consequent silencing of human activity, an image that contrasts with popular descriptions of the richness of its regional musical life (see: Paterson and David 2004; McKerrell & West 2018). In his ethnographic work with members of the Diaspora in the Highlands, Basu (2006) recalls the prevalence of such descriptions of 'emptiness' and 'silence', so it was not surprising that such references emerged in discussions amongst the Clachan community as well. 'Wonderful to see people around the old church instead of it standing alone and deserted as it was whenever I visited,' a member of the Diaspora commented (Friends of Clachan 2018d). However, another described its 'peaceful setting', indicating that while silence is indeed a part of the church's regional and place identity, perceptions vary.

Attention to the significance of sound is particularly relevant at a place like Clachan, where the presence and quality of music is recalled with much fondness and remains an integral part of activities there. During one group interview, this 'terrific sound' at Clachan was praised as well as associated with the kinds of significant life events that have always taken place there and which the Trust are working to ensure always will.

Siobhan: A Highland funeral. I've never heard singing like it. When the place is packed and you get this terrific sound. Because we have no...

Paul: No microphones, no music.

Siobhan: No musical instruments. It's just the singing. Terrific, terrific, very special.

Leah: When they present it, all the hairs on your neck go off. It's like 'Ooh'.

The architectural form of the church can even be said to reflect a particular relationship with sound, as the 1817 building emerged during a post-Reformation, Presbyterian tradition emphasising vocal worship over instrumentation, once widely heard but today represented

primarily by the Gaelic psalm singing (psalmody) still practiced by a few congregations of the Free Church of Scotland in the Outer Hebrides.⁹⁶

The role of music has expanded since the Trust took ownership, contributing to perceptions of Clachan as a community place. Feld points to the importance of sound in placemaking, where 'as place is sensed, senses are placed; as places make sense, senses make place' (1996: 91). The holiday carols at Clachan are a highlight of the year, even more so since the buy-out raised awareness.

It's great. And as I say, our Christmas service isn't a religious service. It's headed up by somebody, one of our neighbours, who will present the lessons and the carols, and we'll have neighbours doing music beforehand and neighbours doing music afterwards. You know, it's just... much more... everybody will get together rather than just, 'Oh that's the Church of Scotland' or 'That's the Free Church' or 'That's the Roman Catholics'. It's our space.

Neighbours coming together to perform and enjoy music is described as transforming place into something shared. Similarly, some fundraising efforts take the form of musical performances, as when the Oban & Lorn Strathspey & Reel Band, supported by the Ullapool Gaelic Choir, arranged a concert for donations towards refurbishment costs.

My approach to the significance of sound follows from perspectives in architectural theory and the interdisciplinary work of auditory culture studies, bringing together attention to this dimension of a place and the embodied, socio-cultural experiences of it. Architectural writer and proponent of understanding architecture as an experiential process, Pallasmaa describes how 'sight isolates, whereas sound incorporates', creating a collective experience of 'acoustic intimacy' with a space (2012: 54). Sight was also mentioned previously in the impact of looking out onto the landscape, and in that can be understood as an individual experience with the landscape. Bull and Back then locate that sound and space in its context, as 'sounds are embedded with both cultural and personal meanings; sounds do not come at us merely raw' (2016: 7).

Taken together, then, I argue that people gathering to engage in music, conversation, and other features of the auditory landscape at Clachan has the power to generate a sense of community and togetherness now associated with it as a place (see also: Schulze 2018; Kakalis 2020). Such was the experience of one trustee during the 2015

⁹⁶ For more on Scottish, and particularly Highland psalmody see: ART XIV 1840; Cuthbert 1890.

Christmas service, when the campaign to prevent the church from closing was underway. 'The younger folk were all engaged, everyone with an instrument joined in the music, and the chatter over tea afterwards showed what a boost we had all received from just gathering together under one roof' (BBC 2018). This 'special feeling' of 'a lovely community occasion' came again in 2018, when the Trust hosted the first festive event under community ownership.⁹⁷

The whole range of ages, skills and talents within the community contributed - from our youngest reader of a poem aged only 7, through teens and on upwards [naming no names!]. Gaelic and English were included, Bible readings and poems, carol music, a yarn, and then more music while people chatted over a cup of tea and a mince pie. The buzz of conversation from the crowd of folk was a pleasure to hear. And so many comments were about the feeling and atmosphere produced because of the whole community coming together in this spot. Nobody left out and everyone helping in one way or another. It takes a lot of goodwill from so many people to make such a successful occasion and that is why it was truly 'special' (Friends of Clachan 2019).

In this instance, the auditory landscape—people of all ages chatting, singing, engaging in cultural expressions in both English and Gaelic—both communicated and generated a sense of community rooted at Clachan.

The importance of sound in the life of the building and its community extends beyond concerts and musical performances, as my informants expressed an interest in utilising the building's 'quite good' acoustics for lectures and film screenings, as well as creating a place for informal conversation and connection. These support the social and cultural needs of the community whilst strengthening the sense of community embodied by the church. In addition, as the Trust is relatively new and still in the process of making necessary repairs, followed by any material changes they may wish to make to the building, their activities will undoubtedly continue to develop and represent their values and wishes for Clachan and its community. This leads to the theme of the following section, which is how the grassroots, voluntary heritage work of the Trust is generating community resilience through their ownership of Clachan.

⁹⁷ This important local event was held again in 2019 to much success, described to me as having 'all seats taken'. The fact that a secular community group fills a church for a festive event where the active church could not may be a discussion for further research.

5.3.4. Grassroots heritage and a resilient future

Gathered around a wooden table in a quiet corner of the café, a fresh round of tea or coffee in hand, my meeting with four CLHT trustees was not an unusual sight in this unofficial community hub. Here at the Ceilidh Place, a combined hotel, café, and bookshop on the western end of Ullapool's main commercial street, a few young people sat with laptops and pots of tea whilst tourists in hiking gear breakfasted next to locals in casual but hardy clothes suitable for the temperamental Highland weather. I had already found myself here several times in the few days since I arrived, either sheltering from sudden spring downpours or drawn by the promises of hot food, electrical outlets, and friendly conversations with strangers. After my interview with the trustees ran its course, I remembered a recent discovery I wanted to share with them.

MM: If you want to know something kind of amazing... I went home [to the USA] in December and I found a book that a relative wrote back in the 1980s after traveling to Scotland to do some family history research. Apparently, my great-great-grandmother emigrated from just a few miles north of here in the 1890s. Her birth certificate says, 'in the Parish of Lochbroom.' Then it lists a Gaelic place name.

Leah: Oh wow.

Siobhan: Where did your ancestor come from in Lochbroom?

MM: I have it written down, here...

Leah: We'll have to find a Gaelic speaker and maybe someone who knows the old place names.

We did not have to go far to find a Gaelic speaker, as while we were leaving the cafe one of the trustees recognised a man sitting at a nearby table. He was able to provide more clarification on the place name—Rhegreanoch—and the trustees and I then continued out into the sunny day with talks of looking into this while I was there. Though I ended up not pursuing this personal genealogy, a week or so after I returned to Edinburgh I received an e-mail from one of the trustees. She had recently attended a memorial service at a house she discovered to be in Rhegreanoch. There were only two houses left standing, and as she had visited the older of the two, now called 'Old Rhegreanoch', she presumed this could have been where my ancestor lived. Thinking of me, she took a few photos and attached them to the e-mail.



Figure 48. One of the photos sent by a member of the Trust

I share this story not to speak of my personal connection to the region, but to illustrate the kind of grassroots heritage work being done by the Trust. Many others have had similar experiences of being connected with places associated with their families, as recounted by the Trust or in thankful posts on their social media. Such heritage work by the Trust, including its methods and goals, is a critical component of community ownership here and has complex implications beyond safeguarding the building. In this section, I consider the grassroots nature of the Trust, define the heritage work they are engaged in, and establish how both help generate a resilient community.

‘Ordinary folk’: Grassroots organising

Investigating and communicating findings about Old Rhegreanoch is one small example of the continuous heritage work undertaken by the Trust, and while more on the material aspect of this work will be discussed later, my focus now is its grassroots character. The Trust’s status as a community—rather than professional or institutional—heritage organisation was acknowledged during the inaugural AGM in 2018.

Chairman: You see, we’re not Braemore Hall [local village hall], and we know not to tread on their toes. We’re not a museum, and we don’t want to tread on their toes either. So, it’s kind of a delicate matter. We have to try and find a role.

Keith: We are a heritage society.

The shape and scope of this role has yet to be finalised, as continued fabric repairs and improvements, limitations in activity due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and fundraising efforts forestall action on finalising proposed uses. Regardless, I argue that as a community body the Trust navigates between institutional, 'official' heritage discourse and the lived material and narrative landscape in which heritage is generated.

I deliberately avoid referring to what Smith (2006) terms the Authorised Heritage Discourse (AHD) when describing dominant heritage discourse in this context, despite its common use as a framework for understanding the privileging of institutions and expertise in dictating what constitutes 'the past' that must be protected and interpreted for posterity. This is because, as I found throughout my fieldwork, area heritage authority largely rests with the Ullapool Museum, a local institution of modest scale, while the influence of government heritage bodies such as Historic Environment Scotland and The Highland Council Archaeology Team are little felt unless sought out.⁹⁸ In this rural locale, the influence of the AHD is thus greatly reduced, and further research may even explore how heritage as undertaken and experienced in such settings may be seen as 'disrupting' the AHD, as Robertson (2015) posits regarding ruined vernacular housing known as blackhouses. With this in mind, rather than evoking the complex framework of heritage formation and representation implied by the AHD, I refer more simply to *official* heritage as interpretations offered by organisations locally perceived as holding authority on the subject, such as the Ullapool Museum.

Clachan Lochbroom Heritage Trust is an example of grassroots organising, that being a collective effort by individuals at the local community level, and this has implications for how they understand and approach notions of heritage. As Hodges and Watson attest in their study on community management of historic sites in the UK, 'local communities can both recognise and value the sites which are local to them and, with some initial funding, become actively involved in their long-term care and management' (2000: 233). One member of the Trust described those involved as 'ordinary folk with livings to make. We're and involved in other voluntary projects too, especially in the summer!' Even the most well-known local historian, whom everyone I encountered pointed to if I ever needed any

⁹⁸ The museum team consists of a Museum Manager, Collections Assistant, Gaelic Medium Museum Assistant, and Curatorial Mentor. Their work is supported by a team of volunteers (Ullapool Museum 2022).

information—‘He literally wrote the book on it,’ as one trustee said, and his *Lochbroom Through the Centuries* was indeed a valuable source for the historical overview that opened this chapter—is a solicitor by trade and a historian by passion. Such ready participation was described by one Ullapool resident as being ‘very in-character’ for the area. As ‘ordinary folk’ they adapt the information of official heritage sources and translate it within the everyday lived context of being part of the Clachan community.

In this sense, they act as intermediaries between heritage as described and heritage as participatory and lived. For example, the Ullapool Museum presents information about the *Hector* while the Trust provides the perspective of the surviving local community and maintains Clachan as an accessible, active place that contextualises and evokes this history as part of a living heritage. This dynamic is particularly clear in stories of the Trust interacting with visitors from the Diaspora, as in the following example where, after learning about their genealogical history in the museum, a family is then guided by Trust volunteers in experiencing and connecting with it at Clachan.

These visitors had spent a whole day in Ullapool Museum delving into the family history and came away with masses of information - we are all so lucky to have the Museum. We were able to help by identifying the probable site of the family house and giving some of the wider history of the strath and Clachan. There were some tears as they got closer to the lives of their ancestors here, and were able to imagine them attending services at Clachan, and being baptised here (Friends of Clachan 2018c).

I describe Clachan as a place of *living heritage* as it is an active part of this community and continuing to evolve under the Trust’s ownership. Poullos similarly describes a concept of living heritage as ‘inextricably linked to the concept of continuity’ with a community where ‘change is embraced as a part of the continuity’ (2014: 21). This reflects a general trend within heritage discourse since the early 2000s towards ‘people-centred approaches’ and involving communities in heritage management and interpretation, most visibly the development of ICCROM’s Living Heritage Sites programme and subsequent ‘living heritage approach’ (ibid.; Court & Wijesuriya 2015).

The Trust’s general lack of relevant heritage and building management expertise amongst the membership has led to uncertainty, at least in the early stage during which I was present, regarding how Clachan should evolve. This reflects concerns by Hodges and Watson for ‘communities who are suddenly expected to take on the role of heritage

managers' (2000: 242).⁹⁹ Throughout the 2018 AGM, a need to consult with architects, Historic Environment Scotland, and others who could advise on the design and legal aspects of historical building ownership and management was repeatedly raised.

It has to happen in stages. The first stage is to find out, in a tentative way, what's possible by talking to Historic Scotland and whatever. Then gradually we decide what we want to do. But the first stage has to come first. There's no point having grandiose ideas about what to do if in the end it turns out not to be possible because of the geography or laws.

While drawing this particular meeting to a close, the Chairman made similar points about the need for guidance from trained professionals, particularly with regards to architectural designs for proposed uses, grant applications, and permitted treatment of a B-listed building.

What I'd like to propose is that by next year's AGM we have feasibility studies provided by professionals saying, 'In this building these are the possibilities.' We can't say that because we're just ideas, we're not builders, not electricians. All we can do in the intervening year is talk to everybody in our community and beyond and say, 'Look, we've got great ideas; we've now got the church; we need money; we're going to be devoting our energies to getting professional advice as to the possibilities of the building.'

Where design and heritage expertise may be lacking, the surrounding community has supplied other skills in the areas of building maintenance and repair. These activities include, among others, taking action to increase accessibility by installing a wheelchair ramp at the south entrance and laying a path from the road to the side gate, re-instating an external door, and tradesman working on joinery repairs and re-slating the roof to keep the building water-tight.

⁹⁹ It should be reiterated here that, as explored in greater detail in Chapter Three, additional resources are being developed and funded by The Scottish Government with the aim of reducing such concerns in buy-outs like Clachan through education and access to professional assistance.

Heritage work

Having established the grassroots nature of the Trust, this section presents the heritage work they engage in, which emerged as an important dimension of their mission to create what they describe as ‘a welcoming place for locals and visitors alike’. My experience of the Trust investigating and communicating findings about Old Rhegreanoch was one small example of this. By *heritage work* I mean deliberate practices and acts involved in developing and communicating notions of heritage (see: Tolia-Kelly et al. 2017: 7). The concept encompasses a wide variety of practices and engagements, represented by Brichet in her ethnographic account of collaborative heritage work in the reconstruction of a Danish plantation in Ghana where both heritage professionals and laymen from the surrounding community were involved through engagements with each other, ‘with lime, stones, climate, rulers, exhibition posters, trees, archives, storage rooms, emails and official documents’ (2018: 20). The Trust have likewise engaged in different articulations of heritage work in efforts to create a community place.

The most readily apparent work undertaken by the Trust is of course its acquisition of Clachan for reasons well-established throughout this chapter, followed by the initiation of a programme of repair work. However, what I would like to bring attention to is how their efforts to repair the church’s historical fabric have also had the secondary effects of supporting traditional craftsmen and raising awareness of traditional building skills, bringing the community together in support of Clachan and the Trust’s mission, and providing opportunities to educate and raise awareness. In one example, the process of re-slating the roof was chronicled on the Trust’s social media, from videos of the veteran roofer explaining and demonstrating the process of sizing slates while atop the roof, to the discovery and subsequent genealogical discussion surrounding 19th century nails with possible origins at a former nearby forge. Local residents provided accommodations for the tradesman, unloaded construction materials and removed debris, and even donated 2000 Ballachulish slates.¹⁰⁰ The sight of activity like the scaffolding and works pictured below drew the

¹⁰⁰ It is worth noting the origin of these donated slates as sourcing this traditional building material domestically has become a challenge since Scotland’s slate quarries closed in the 1960s. Many new projects resort to using imported slates, particularly from Spain, however, due to differences in material character these do not have the same final appearance as Scottish slate (see: Walker 2006; Cárdenes Van den Eynde 2020). As a historic building, it is fitting that replacements are from the now-defunct Ballachulish Slate Quarry,

attention of passersby who were keen to learn about Clachan and donate to its future. The roof was completed after what was described by the Trust as ‘a truly communal effort to enhance a building for the benefit of our community’, demonstrating the power and scope of the Trust’s heritage work (Friends of Clachan 2021).



Figure 49. A view of the re-slatting process in March 2021. According to the original caption, ‘if Balblair hadn’t been Cleared in 1820 we would be able to see the fields and houses below the forestry on the right-hand background’, demonstrating once again the ever-present and contextualising nature of Clearance narratives (Photo by Clachan Lochbroom Heritage Trust)

Beyond this work related to the fabric of the building, the Trust engage in of other instances of heritage work that promote Clachan as a place of enduring significance. Many have already been mentioned previously, such as facilitating visits and events and sharing information with different types of visitors (local residents, domestic and international tourists, the Diaspora, etc.) as well as maintaining a website and social media presence which both include a database of graves. I was also told by a trustee about a brochure he was tasked with creating, which would presumably be made available to the public, at various locations. Acknowledging the extent and diversity of these efforts recognise the work of the Trust beyond simply purchasing the building and the manifold methods through which understandings of Clachan are developed, constructed, and shared.

which operated from the late-17th to mid-20th centuries, to help maintain the integrity of its historic materials and character.

Returning to the concept of living heritage discussed earlier, through voluntary community action grassroots initiatives like Clachan can be said to offset the ‘tendency of heritage management processes to fossilise and “preserve” heritage as unchanged and unchangeable’ (Waterton and Smith 2010: 12).¹⁰¹ When enlivened by the active and ongoing engagement of a community, heritage is dynamic and a source of growth and revitalisation. The following section explains how the work of the Trust has not just saved a place of local, regional, and increasingly international significance from ruin; rather, it has become an engine of awareness and community-building through which to foster a resilient community able to enjoy Clachan for generations. As one member summarised this sentiment: ‘800 years already, and 800 more to go!’

Building a resilient community

This section follows from the work of Beel et al. (2017) on the capacity of rural grassroots heritage initiatives to help generate more resilient communities. Explorations of resilience in the context of community heritage practices are relatively recent, evolving out of an interest in community responses to the ‘Great Recession’ of the late 2000s and against an emphasis on how ‘resilient communities are considered to be those that bounce back to a pre-disturbance state’ rather than evolving through them (ibid.: 461). Such definitions do not allow for growth and change, so more nuanced understandings have been proposed to account for resilience within the complex and ever-evolving nature of communities.

Community resilience is the existence, development, and engagement of community resources by community members to thrive in an environment characterized by change, uncertainty, unpredictability, and surprise. Members of resilient communities intentionally develop personal and collective capacity that they engage to respond to and influence change, to sustain and renew the community, and to develop new trajectories for the communities’ future (Magis 2010: 402).

Developing this understanding further by applying it to ‘the production of community heritage and culture from a rural, grassroots, non-institutional perspective’, Beel et al. emphasise the importance of ‘human agency’ in the generation of resiliency, as seen in their

¹⁰¹ The local Ullapool Museum is also taking action to create this sense of living heritage, most recently through the two year project to mark the 200th anniversary of the Inverlael Clearances through public programme of events and regular involvement of the surrounding community (Ullapool Museum 2020a).

case study examples of rural heritage societies in Scotland creating digital archives. They describe other examples as including 'small-scale museums and the restoration of buildings for use as hireable community spaces to book-publishing, community amenities and digital archives', within which Clachan as a restoration-in-progress for community use squarely falls (2017: 467).

When it was announced that Clachan would close as an active church, the threat of ruination and the general uncertainty this caused within the local community sparked a groundswell of voluntary engagement that has continued to evolve and, I would argue, generate a more resilient and empowered community. As a heritage society, the Trust is engaged in 'a process that is actively and critically used to negotiate and facilitate social and cultural change within the community' (Smith 2006: 7). Such work is described by Beel et al. (2017) as bringing about community development by contributing to a sense of community identity and control of local narratives (see also: Flinn 2007).

In addition to heritage work undertaken by the Trust, there is keen interest in utilising Clachan as a vehicle for other beneficial activities and services, confirming the recent observations of Beel et al. in Scotland that 'community heritage organisations have also begun to have grounded 'impacts' that move away from heritage interests alone, often revitalising buildings and providing community services' (2017: 459). My informants described visions of a small café in the currently closed off gallery level, with comfortable seating, a few shelves of books on local history, and either a rotating exhibit space or permanent historical information on display, where locals and visitors alike can take respite from the elements, enjoy the dramatic view, and chat. They described the potential for film screenings, concerts and other performances. And there would of course be space to host important life events, such as weddings and funerals. They want to, as described in one meeting, 'maximize the possible use of this building bearing in mind its history and its cultural importance.' Some of these proposed uses have already begun in some form, such as musical performances and gatherings, so it remains to be seen how the Trust and its home at Clachan will continue to evolve. As one woman told me after sharing her dream for the space, 'We shall see. It's early days yet.'

5.4. Discussion

This chapter presented the case study of Clachan Church and its community ownership through Clachan Lochbroom Heritage Trust. As a grassroots initiative by 'ordinary folk', the Trust was created to save a place threatened with ruin or conversion to a use that would sever the sense of continuity embodied in the fabric of the building as part of an affective historic and natural landscape. Clachan demonstrates the deep significance of a seemingly unassuming rural location in the Highlands, owing to its continuity of activity dating back to the Bronze Age and entanglement in local and global narratives of displacement and identity. Through the work of the Trust, Clachan's community continues to grow beyond the Lochside hamlets in which its core members reside, being those who encounter the church in everyday life like they would an elderly neighbour.

The transition to community ownership can also be viewed as preventing the church from conforming to prevailing narratives associated with ruins and the melancholy of lost people and places. This is not to say that a sense of absence has been mitigated by community ownership, but rather that it is being managed by continued access to embodied engagements with a place that maintains a tangible connection with people and events of the past. In addition, an increasingly vibrant soundscape draws people together to experience the church and generate a sense of community.

The Trust is also transforming Clachan into a source of community resilience, repairing the fabric of the building and facilitating increased engagement with a living heritage that they aim to keep an active part of the community. As stated previously, the final form Clachan will take in terms of use was not confirmed at the time of my fieldwork, though options under consideration included a small café, exhibit space, or installation of a film projector screen, some or all of the pews are removed, or its restoration to how it looked at a particular point in time. However, the buy-out campaign and ongoing improvements to the fabric, such as the re-slatting of the roof, have continued to generate interest and testify to the commitment of the Trust in ensuring Clachan remains an accessible and significant place in the community for years to come.

Chapter 6. Conclusion

This thesis presented case studies of Bellfield and Clachan Church in a timely investigation of communities reusing Church of Scotland churches as these places increasingly fall surplus to requirements and people come together to keep them 'alight and alive'. This accelerating trend of church closure and reuse, including current plans by the Church of Scotland to downsize the number of churches 40% between 2017 and 2027, was established in Chapter Two by tracing the development of the Kirk and its extensive built legacy. Chapter Three then presented the evolving social and legal contexts in which Action Porty and Clachan Lochbroom Heritage Trust were established and took ownership of their respective places as community bodies. This placed Bellfield and Clachan Church as part of an ongoing trend of increased community ownership in Scotland, supported by legislation like the landmark Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003, inspired by successful earlier buy-outs like the isles of Eigg and Gigha, and supported by initiatives such as Highlands and Islands Enterprise and the Scottish Land Fund. Rather than to compare and contrast, the purpose of these case studies is an in-depth investigation to understand and convey the diversity of experiences and circumstances within such grassroots community projects.

This final chapter begins with a reflection on ways in which this thesis contributes to existing research and addresses gaps in knowledge identified in Chapter One. The following section considers both case studies together to discuss emergent themes I argue are important for understanding this particular type of reuse. Using the overarching theme of *living places*, I present how *continuity and change* and notions of *home* emerge as powerful practices and products of community ownership at Bellfield and Clachan Church, and the implications of these on how both places are conceptualised and experienced. The chapter continues with an exploration of potential wide-ranging impacts of this research, from providing insights for community groups interested in taking ownership of places to informing government agencies and policymakers developing further land reform legislation. The thesis concludes with recommendations for future research.

6.1. Contributions to knowledge

The work presented in this thesis addresses methodological and topical gaps in research identified in Chapter One surrounding the adaptive reuse of churches. The following section considers how this work, from the use of case studies in Scotland to a focus on places sold by the Church of Scotland and an ethnographic approach to studying community ownership, contributes unique insights and perspectives for understanding a phenomenon found across countries and denominations.

The location of these case studies in rural and suburban Scotland offers much-needed data and perspectives within the phenomenon of church reuse, addressing significant gaps in geographic representation in existing research. This lack of representation is identified by Lynch and LeDrew in their contemporary work on church reuse in rural Newfoundland, Canada. They conclude that ‘little is known about the socio-cultural or material contexts and impacts of these adaptive reuses in places outside the mainstream and on the ‘edge’’, referring to both major urban centres and dominant trends in existing discourse, the latter of which I address later in this section (2020: 311). Beyond a concentrated interest in major urban centres like Toronto and Amsterdam, the assessment of existing literature presented in Chapter One identifies the Netherlands and Canada as producing much of this research, while the UK has been notably quiet in these conversations despite the ubiquity of church reuse there. Rather, topics of closure and reuse are more often discussed at the level of heritage bodies and stakeholder organisations concerned with best practices for design interventions involving historical buildings and their surroundings than investigated as research subjects. This research thus raises Scotland in international discourse on church reuse and broadens domestic approaches and understandings of this phenomenon.

In focusing on places sold by the Church of Scotland—a national church navigating ongoing trends of membership decline and managing an extensive built legacy increasingly falling surplus to requirements—this research also offers unique institutional representations of closure and reuse. This focus on a single religious institution is an opportunity for deeper insights into why their churches are falling redundant and the processes of reuse these places are increasingly undergoing. This work also provides a point of comparison and context for studies on closure and reuse involving the Catholic Church in

the Netherlands (Beekers 2016), The United Church of Canada (Stephenson 2015), and other denominations, as well as contributing to wider studies, such as those concerned with European or national churches.

The case studies of Bellfield and Clachan Church offer insights into a dynamic period of land reform and community empowerment in Scotland, presenting not only legislative and social developments at the time of research but also the experiences of those navigating this evolving environment. The Bellfield case study in particular captures the early days of the first successful utilisation of the Community Right to Buy process, making it a unique and timely resource for further studies. The topic of recent land reforms in Scotland has already begun gaining interest internationally for its emphasis on community ownership (see: Hoffman 2013; Lovett and Combe 2019). The research presented here is positioned to answer this interest and encourage further study and representation of community ownership in Scotland and internationally.

Beyond the unique contributions of this research emerging from its setting in Scotland, the centring of community groups and their experiences expands the limited body of work involving church reuse. The limited scope of existing research is evident in the dominance of large urban centres and interest primarily in design interventions and topics of religion, secularisation, and the experiences of religious groups (Lynch and LeDrew 2020: 311). Even amongst research on non-religious uses for former churches, the focus has primarily been on commercial uses and private ownership, such as the gastro pub (Stephenson 2015), winery (Clark 2008), and dance studio (Beekers 2018), making this study of community ownership a novel contribution to an under-explored dimension of church reuse. This attentiveness to the experiences of community groups reveals unique insights into how these places are conceptualised and the complex, ongoing processes of negotiation that comprise this type of adaptive reuse. Such attention to community ownership is increasingly important, as more initiatives like Bellfield and Clachan Church are likely to develop in response to evolving land reform legislation and networks of support, greater awareness of successful efforts like Bellfield, and the continued surfeit of churches in Scotland.

The case studies presented here also expand limited ethnographic attention to church reuse and present a novel focus on adaptive reuse as an experiential process, where embodied experiences and engagements with place inform ongoing negotiations involved in reusing churches. Existing ethnographic research involving former churches has focused on dynamics between religion and secularisation as embodied in the building and its use, or the material and emotional consequences of conversions to new religious uses (Beekers 2016; 2018). This has left the everyday lived experiences of those participating in processes of community reuse notably absent, something this research aims to have addressed through in-depth representations of Action Party and Clachan Lochbroom Heritage Trust.

6.2. Discussion: ‘Brought alight and alive’

Nineteenth century architectural writer John Ruskin declared that buildings, having reached a certain age and possessing ‘that golden stain of time’, can achieve ‘language and life’ equal to those of the ‘natural objects of the world’ (1849: 177). In this view, the accumulation of time and its effects on a building generate what is described as something akin to a life. One volunteer at Bellfield, however, described the former church as being ‘brought alight and alive’ through its use by the community. From celebrations to civic meetings and afterschool lessons, these activities ‘provide love and enjoyment’ to create a vibrant community hub. As the executive director of Historic Churches Scotland explained in an interview, ‘without people the building is not going to survive.’

Such ethnographic centring of experience and interactions with places is where I locate my own argument for understanding former churches in community ownership as living places, drawing together insights from the preceding discussions of my fieldwork to develop a perspective for understanding this growing phenomenon.¹⁰² Just as these case studies demonstrate differing community and architectural characteristics, historical contexts, and routes to community ownership, they also represent different ways in which reused churches can be understood as living places. Such attention to the nuanced ways in

¹⁰² I do not connect this final discussion of my fieldwork to existing theological discourse on churches as ‘living stones’ and ‘the living temple’, as this emerges largely from a Roman Catholic context and is beyond my interests here (Committee on the Liturgy 2000: 7).

which former churches are valued and how they are experienced and understood is important, as these inform reactions to redundancy and approaches to reuse.

As the earlier quote by a volunteer describes, Bellfield can be conceptualised as a living place because it is full of activity and uses considered positive for the community. It is 'brought alive' through the vibrancy and diversity of these performances, celebrations, workshops, classes, and myriad other uses. During several interviews, those involved explained how they are primarily interested in 'saving what happens in the spaces, not the spaces themselves', prioritising the continuity of activity and the opportunities these spaces foster. This point of view is expressed in part by the greater significance attributed to the regularly used halls, compared to the seldom used former sanctuary. Similarly, a seemingly unremarkable cherry tree in front of the halls, in the garden that was once the graveyard, emerged in every interview as the favourite feature of Bellfield because children have long enjoyed playing in it.

That tree is very special. And in the days of the afterschool club, it was clambered all over by kids. When my kids are here, they clamber. When you've got 15 children out there it can be chaos, but a good chaos. It's a great climbing tree. It's my favourite part of the building.

Even interviewees without young children themselves recognised this tree and its activities as 'kind of the heart of it', representing the reason for the buy-out and their efforts to retain and expand upon community use of this place. Where the focus at Bellfield is on activities, Clachan Church can be conceptualised as a living place through relationships with the building and the deep continuity embodied in its fabric.

My observations at Clachan Church revealed a living place in the sense that people actively want to interact with and care for its historic fabric, treating it like one of the elderly neighbours along Lochside in whom much local history resides that would otherwise be lost. This everyday engagement and care is part of the Trust's larger scale of heritage work, through which they create a living heritage that serves as a generator of resiliency in the community. This people-centred heritage recognises change as part of a larger continuity, allowing this place of deep significance to evolve with its community rather than be disconnected from it through ruination. While the existing fabric dates to only 1817, it embodies the enduring spiritual and communal significance of the site and wider landscape, acting as a surviving tangible connection with a community dispersed through time and across the world.

Within the theme of living places is also a sense of loss, threaded throughout this research as both the loss of churches by congregations and the threat of loss of places of significance for communities. My research focus has been on the latter. While explored in greater detail on the topic of Clachan's connections to the Clearances and its subsequent narratives of depopulation and disruption, it must be acknowledged that these case studies and other instances of church reuse are inseparable from discussions of loss. As inherited places, the original ecclesiastic use and its prior owners are inherently felt in the materials left behind, and as explored at length in my description and analysis of Action Party's relationship with Bellfield, it is left to the new owners to navigate this complex mnemonic and material landscape. Both demonstrate how this is managed, allowing these new places to grow into their new uses.

I argue that framing churches reused by communities as living places is helpful for exploring and determining the viability of potential projects by recognising strong values or understandings that may guide the project in a sustainable and confident direction, such as the heritage emphasis at Clachan and the focus on local amenity at Bellfield. Within this overarching theme are two others that emerged from my fieldwork as particularly important for understanding this phenomenon. First to be addressed below is *continuity and change*, followed by notions of *home*.

6.2.1. Continuity and change

In participating in the adaptive reuse of churches, their new owners attempt to balance continuity of what the community values with any desired changes. I do not position these concepts as opposing forces; rather, as these places have always been 'as flight, as movement, as a series of transformations' throughout their long histories—with additions constructed, new doorways added and old ones bricked up, memorials installed, wiring and pipe systems integrated into the fabric, spaces closed away or renovated—change can be viewed as an inherent feature of their continuity as living places (Latour and Yaneva 2008: 80). Viewing processes of continuity and change as interrelated rather than dualistically opposed also emerges in contemporary discussions on the historic built environment, as in observations how 'the making of future heritage often involved maintaining continuity with the past through processes of change' (Harrison et al. 2020: 12).

Attention to this relationship is particularly useful in considering the case of Clachan Church, due to the guiding influence of heritage values there emerging from a deep sense of history that plays a significant role in place and community identities. Attending to the interplay of processes of continuity and change in the context of community ownership offers insights into relationships, understandings, and articulations of community and place, including how these have evolved and build towards the future.

Community ownership in itself presents this dynamic. Churches are often considered to have always belonged to their surrounding communities, from original residents who funded their construction to following generations who may have long utilised these spaces for activities and events despite not being part of the worshipping population. This was discussed with regards to Bellfield in Chapter Four and was a commonly encountered opinion throughout my fieldwork. In this perspective, the legal transition of ownership to a community body is not a dramatic change, particularly in cases such as Bellfield and Clachan Church where new owners express a commitment to maintaining availability for religious gatherings or meetings. In other words, these buildings are not entirely 'set adrift in a secular world' and separated from their religious origins (Clark 2007: 77).

In fact, it could be argued that not only do my case study sites serve the same fundamental need of people to come together—'the church served that purpose and now as a society we're beginning to discover it can be done without the church,' as one Bellfield volunteer explained—they expand the potential for religious experience at the site. By making places previously dedicated to a single denomination open to use by all, the former church becomes significant for others, encompassing more dimensions of the community. This was described at Clachan Church when one woman said, 'I just think it feels like a welcoming place for all of us. Whereas before it would just have been a denomination that it was for. Now it's for all of us.' At Bellfield, this inclusivity was on vibrant display during the 2019 Scottish Ganesh Festival, which saw the Celebration Hall festooned with coloured flags and a decorated altar set next to the tall pulpit still draped with a Church of Scotland brocade. The reuse of these churches is a response to what one Bellfield trustee described as the 'continued need to come together as a community' even as demographics and perspectives may shift.

Attention to processes of continuity and change offers insights into the nature of both the community body involved and the new identity being generated at the former church for its future under community ownership. When discussing the performance of place at Bellfield, examples of change such as the installation of solar panels on the flat roof of the Large Hall and obtaining a grant to provide bicycle racks demonstrated a commitment to community health and resilience through environmental sustainability. The need to modify the buildings and make them more accessible was raised at both locations—part of a broader commitment to creating inclusive places, which appears intrinsic to community ownership. For example, at Clachan Church, a ramp was added, a new path laid, and a door previously closed up was reinstated. There were also instances of what I described as ‘confounding materiality’, where tensions between maintaining something as inherited and moving forward with desired changes frustrates the new owners and their attempts at solidifying their intentions for these places. The most prominent example in both case studies were the pews, described as uncomfortable and severely limiting what could be done with large former sanctuary spaces, but also useful for certain events and intrinsically tied to site’s history and memories of the place.

Considerations of continuity in particular are valuable in identifying why community bodies are formed with the intent of taking ownership of these places. The discursive posturing of buy-out campaigns are calls to action, describing what is at risk of being lost or disrupted. At Bellfield, it was primarily the threat of losing longstanding communal spaces, home to much social and individual memory. ‘You’ve got to save these important spaces you have,’ as one Action Party trustee explained of her motivations to join in the campaign. At Clachan, a key motivator was the threat of losing the deep sense of continuity embodied in the historic fabric of the building and its setting and losing a tangible locus for identity narratives of a unique global community. These motivations then guide how the reused former church is conceptualised and engaged with as community bodies embark on their projects of reuse.

6.2.2. Home

Whether creating ‘a home [away] from home for everybody’ at Clachan Church or ‘a place to belong’ at Bellfield, notions of *home* emerged as important for understanding relationships with and conceptualisations of my case study locations.¹⁰³ Attention to this brings together analyses of both case studies and offers a lens through which to understand the complex emotions, aspirations and experiences of church reuse by communities in Scotland as they generate these living places. It has already been observed elsewhere that churches can be associated with feelings of home, even by those who are non-religious or of different faiths and who value the sites for their longstanding location in the community or historical and aesthetic value (Beekers 2018). This is because places are ‘doubly constructed’, as Gieryn describes. Beyond material qualities, ‘they are also interpreted, narrated, perceived, felt, understood, and imagined’ (2000: 465). The concept of *home* has long been a topic of discussion across disciplines, and for my purposes here I draw inspiration from Easthope’s broad definition of ‘a particularly significant kind of place with which, and within which, we experience strong social, psychological and emotive attachments. The home is also understood as an open place, maintained and developed through the social relations that stretch beyond it’ (2004: 135-6). This broad definition allows room for consideration of how notions of home manifest within the circumstances of each case study and other examples of church reuse.

Bellfield and Clachan Church present different conceptualisations of *home* through their reuse. Primarily serving its surrounding geographic community as a vibrant hub of activity, Bellfield can be described as a home that provides accessible amenities and opportunities for growth and development through use of its spaces, as well as stability at a time when existing community venues—such as the nearby Portobello Town Hall—are threatened with closure or strained by a growing population. Meanwhile, Clachan Church can be understood as a place of origin and identity, providing a tangible sense of continuity and connection for its global community.

¹⁰³ The first quote is by a trustee with Clachan Lochbroom Heritage Trustee and the second is the official Bellfield motto.

Performative work undertaken by both Action Party and Clachan Lochbroom Heritage Trust deliberately generates their respective senses of home and belonging, and such acts of emplacement, as discussed in Chapter Four, are part of a continual process of place-making 'from individual to collective, from formal to mundane' (Rapport and Williksen 2010: 3-4). This was more readily apparent at Clachan and its embeddedness in Highland narratives of homecoming (Basu 2006). In one example, the Trust described their everyday heritage work of bringing members of the diaspora to visit the church by stating that 'it gives us great pleasure to share in the stories of these families and be able to add to their experience of "coming home". It really does bring home to us that we are a very, very large family, and full of goodwill'. At Bellfield, a commitment to inclusivity and continuity of activity, as well as sustainable interventions in efforts to combat climate change and its threat to their coastal community, generates 'a place to belong'. Similar to this 'belonging' that serves as the slogan for Bellfield, one CLHT trustee stated that 'we want to make it a home from home for everybody', indicating a clear interest in deliberately generating this particular sense of place.

In considering these two case studies, I found such ongoing processes of homemaking emerging from the unique context of each project to be an important dimension of community reuse. Attention to this provides a valuable perspective for understanding the actions of community owners and opens a new dimension for further investigations. For the community groups themselves, awareness of this may offer clarity regarding their mission and how they approach uses of these places.

6.3. Research Impact

The observations and insights presented in this thesis have the potential to inform a wide range of organisations, institutions, and even government agencies and policymakers. The following section explores this potential impact, from providing grassroots organisers with new perspectives on their own community buy-outs to informing the development of national legislation. The potential for such versatility confirms the significance of this research and underscores the importance of further work discussed in the final section.

Whether community groups like Action Party and Clachan Lochbroom Heritage Trust have already taken on projects of reuse or are considering such action, attention to how people engage with and experience places as explored in this thesis offers a wide range of potential uses and benefits. This awareness can inform an organisation's development and promote a stronger sense of identity and direction as they recognise what people value about a place and build upon those existing strengths and connections. Empowered by this understanding, community organisations will be better equipped to develop successful uses according to their unique circumstances and to articulate these plans for funding bodies and stakeholders.

In addition to awareness of how people engage with places, self-reflection by groups on the nature of their organisations and the communities they represent will provide clarity as they negotiate their identities, mission, and activities. This fuller understanding may strengthen conceptualisations of themselves as presented to potential funders and organisation members as well as help in successfully establishing their places within the wider community. Both case study groups presented here were mindful of creating positive relationships with area businesses and services while establishing a unique presence that did not encroach on existing amenities, such as area museums and community venues.

The Church of Scotland and other property owners may also benefit from an increased understanding of community ownership. This will provide insights into why groups such as Action Party and Clachan Lochbroom Heritage Trust are motivated to act and the evolving legal processes involved, such as the Community Right to Buy route utilised at Bellfield. In presenting the complex relationships between people and two examples of former churches brought into community ownership, it is hoped that this thesis inspires greater sensitivity towards the depth of connections that may be present at these places. This is not to say that every former church or building of some other significance will trigger the same collective response as Portobello Old Parish Church or Clachan Church, however, if such interest does arise this thesis provides examples of how these reactions can be more fully understood by current property owners. In addition, learning from the experiences of people currently reusing former places of worship may reduce disruptions and trauma within congregations facing the sale of their churches, as they are more fully aware of potential futures for places they may be distressed at leaving.

Beyond the parties potentially involved in a community buy-out, a diverse range of organisations in Scotland and beyond may also benefit from insights into the phenomenon of community ownership presented in this thesis. Such organisations include those involved with community ownership and empowerment, such as Community Land Scotland and Development Trusts Association Scotland, built environment and heritage interests like the Heritage Trust Network and Built Environment Forum Scotland, and organisations concerned with ecclesiastical buildings, like the Churches Conservation Trust and Future for Religious Heritage. These and others may learn from the successes of the case studies presented here, including Action Party's mobilisation of a 'firehose of support', as one trustee described it, and Clachan Lochbroom Heritage Trust's transformation of a largely disused historic building in need of repairs into the home of a growing international community. The same can be said for learning from areas where my informants struggled or felt that they lacked support. Guidance and support developed as a result of this greater awareness can be translated for other groups through the lens of each organisation—whether that is navigating legislation, community organising, or managing heritage buildings.

This work also has the potential to inform local authorities, government agencies, and funding bodies. Local authorities can benefit from greater awareness of how the people they represent and serve are organising, self-identifying, and engaging with the built environment. At Bellfield, for example, the building was brought into community ownership in response to concerns over both the availability of usable spaces for the growing population and the potential loss of a place of longstanding significance, reflecting needs and priorities amongst the local population. To government agencies and funding bodies, this thesis offers insights into realities faced by communities taking ownership of places and encourages a perspective that considers the everyday impact of policies, legislation, and funding opportunities on experiences and outcomes for these groups.

Beyond understanding the impact of existing legal frameworks in which groups are established and operating, such attention may help reveal gaps in support, issues with which groups are struggling, or nuanced circumstances that may currently be unaccounted for, indicating where policies and opportunities might be adjusted or proposed. Conversely, greater awareness of successful outcomes may underscore the positive impacts of particular policies and encourage further developments in those areas. Attentiveness to the

experiences of groups like Action Party and Clachan Lochbroom Heritage Trust is particularly significant now as communities respond to evolving land reform legislation and the subsequent shifting of rights and processes.

6.4. Recommendations for future research

The final discussion presented here proposes ways in which this work may be expanded upon or inform future research. As this thesis is located at a complex intersection of material culture, policymaking, history, community engagement, and ethnographic accounts of relationships between people and places, it may be taken further in any of these directions. From the architectural designs and physical processes of adaptive reuse to the impact of funding bodies on local level initiatives, there is the potential for additional research in multiple disciplines as well as continued interdisciplinary work. This section also identifies topics that were beyond the scope of this research but which emerged as significant for my informants and their projects of reuse as community organisation.

Further research for the case studies presented here would benefit from the application of additional methods of research and analysis. One sizeable direction not explored in this thesis was the collection of quantitative data on communities and individuals, organisations and stakeholder groups, buildings and activities, and other such potential areas of inquiry. This data could lead to the creation of profiles on community composition, building usage, and the process of reuse, including graphical representations that may be more readily accessible for different audiences and purposes, including government agencies and funding bodies. This data could also be used to generate knowledge beyond what informants may describe of their own experiences and recollections. For example, in addition to learning in an interview that a particular informant attended art classes at Bellfield, data on the frequency of those classes, the number of people in attendance, their ages, and the distances they travelled would reveal a more holistic understanding of activities and the people involved. Discrepancies and other relations between personal responses and quantifiable data may also reveal assumptions, misconceptions, priorities, and other dimensions of understanding and representation at these places.

A greater number of individuals and organisations can be engaged through surveys and focus groups, providing a larger sample of experiences and opinions. Focus groups also create opportunities to observe group dynamics and collective understandings and presentations of the phenomenon under study. Surveys are versatile in that they can be conducted in person or remotely by telephone, virtually, or through the post, making dispersed communities like that of Clachan Church, with its rural locale and global connections, more accessible. However, the suitability of open or closed-ended questions, where the respondent can either answer as they wish or select from fixed options, will depend on the topic under study and the desired data to be collected (Clark et al. 2021). At Bellfield, for example, focus groups could be held with neighbouring residents to explore experiences having an active community centre on their residential street; civic leaders and representatives from the Portobello Community Council, amenity societies, and other local organisations could be brought together to discuss their impressions of the buy-out and its impact on their activities; multiple community initiatives, whether limited to former church ownership, the Edinburgh area, or some other qualification, could discuss the unique challenges and opportunities of their building types, organisational structures, area demographics and so forth to create a cross-sectional understanding of these places and their operation.

Tracking movement through spaces to determine points of greater and lesser engagement and to understand flows of embodied relationships through a building is a longstanding method in museum studies that may also be beneficial in studying projects of adaptive reuse (Hooper-Greenhill 2006). This can be combined with digital technology, as in Mulcahy and Witcomb's use of personal action cameras to record visitors' movements through a space for both documentary purposes and as material for subsequent interviews, where individuals were shown and asked to reflect on their footage (2018: 218). Such technology can also be used to promote a more collaborative research process. In the context of the case studies presented here, people at Bellfield and Clachan Church could be given cameras and instructed to document their activities in video or photo diaries, or to capture their favourite or memorable aspects of these places.

Another option for further research is an increase in case studies. This includes those representing different circumstances from the two presented here to expand understandings of community reuse of churches, as well as those with similarities to build

upon the insights of this research and perhaps offer more nuanced perspectives on discrete building typologies or circumstances (e.g. urban, rural, churches with halls and those without, differing architectural styles, ages, etc.). The organisational structures of groups involved in additional case studies can also be investigated to provide comparative examples for others seeking to establish community bodies, whether for church buyouts or other similar purposes. The exploration of additional examples while maintaining the ethnographic focus of the research presented in this thesis can be facilitated by the use of rapid ethnography. This is defined by anthropologist Vindrola-Padros of the Rapid Research Evaluation and Appraisal Lab at University College London, in summary, as a compressed period of social research between five days to six months in length, often involving a team of researchers in data collection (2021).

While I focused on communities and properties sold by the Church of Scotland, additional opportunities for study arise when this is shifted to different buyers and uses or to places of worship emerging from other religious institutions. With regards to different buyers of former churches, a record kept by the General Trustees (2014) reports that the majority of their properties do not go to community bodies, making the myriad of other new uses—categorised by the Scottish Civic Trust (2006) as commercial, educational, recreational, residential, and multiple use—potentially rich areas for further research. In addition to these transitions to non-religious purposes, there is also continued religious use. The Kirk may dominate in the volume of former churches it disposes of, however, similar questions may be posed of properties emerging from other denominations as well.

Former churches are just one building type being reused by community bodies, meaning the insights and methods from this research may be beneficial in considering other projects of ownership or community mobilisation more broadly. There are a number of contemporary examples of similar, non-church purchases, including the following three.

- Victoria Primary School in the Edinburgh community of Newhaven was acquired utilising Community Asset Transfer by The Heart of Newhaven Community in 2022 to serve as a multi-use hub of activity (Heart of Newhaven Community).
- Bridgend Farmhouse operate a renovated farmhouse of the same name as ‘a sustainable community-owned centre for learning, eating and exercise, where all can learn, work and grow together to develop a flourishing community and place’ (Bridgend Farmhouse n.d.).

- Bannockburn House in Stirling was purchased by the Bannockburn House Trust in 2017 'to safeguard the property, grounds, architecture and history for future generations' (Bannockburn House Trust n.d.).

There is also potential for work with older, more established examples of such grassroots initiatives, which would be particularly insightful in understanding the evolution of community ownership in Scotland. These would include the key buyouts of Assynt and the isles of Gigha and Eigg discussed in Chapter Three.

This thesis established the existence of international trends of church closure, reuse, and community ownership; however, it did not undertake in-depth investigations of how these case studies can be understood in relation to and potentially benefit from awareness of examples elsewhere. Comparative studies will be beneficial not just in understanding these wider contexts and the nuances of building typologies, demographics, and other points of investigation, but learning from the experiences of others may influence the continued development of policies and practices from the level of individual projects to national guidance. Such studies may also create opportunities for international dialogue between researchers, organisations, and possibly even the projects under study themselves.

There were also topics and experiences within in my fieldwork which did not fall within the scope of my research but presented important potential for further study due to their significance for my informants and their work. Environmental sustainability emerged as an important topic at Bellfield in particular and was tied to their mission of community wellness and continuity. My informants at both projects were also acutely aware of their relationship with other amenities and businesses, expressing a desire to create a culture of collaboration and avoid encroaching on existing offerings. Attention to such relationships could provide vital information for understanding community dynamics, development, and even the economic impact of places like these case studies. Approaching topics such as sustainability and local economics may also present opportunities for interdisciplinary or organisational partnerships and interest from more diverse audiences. In discussions at Bellfield and events I attended where representatives of similar initiatives came together to share their experiences, a culture of 'democratic ownership' and 'democratic spaces' was described as something they wished to cultivate as community ventures.¹⁰⁴ This was

¹⁰⁴ I am referring specifically to the Community Land Scotland event hosted at Bellfield on 17 August 2019 and a gathering at the community owned and operated Bridgend Farmhouse in Edinburgh on 7 March 2019.

described to me as an emphasis on transparency, representation, and access, a study of which would require greater attention to the functions and social relationships of the organisation rather than their experiences of a place, as was my focus. These examples demonstrate how the formation and activities of community bodies and the places where their shared efforts are made material, such as Bellfield and Clachan Church, are rich with potential for understanding people and places in Scotland today and in the future.

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