This booklet is full of interesting information about place names, folklore, history and stories from the North Coast. All of the stories were collected by Fèis Air An Oir participants who interviewed local people about the heritage of the area.
Pròiseact nan Taslann
Fèisean nan Gàidheal

’S e pròiseact ùr aig Fèisean nan Gàidheal a th’ ann am Pròiseact nan Taslann far an teid com-pàirtichean nam Fèisean air feadh Alba a hroinnachadh gu bhith a’ chruinnachadh, a’ claradh agus a’ taisbeannadh dualchas ionaidal ann sgìre a’ chein. Tha Fèis Air An Oir a’ ruith chlasachaidh ann an ceol traidiseanta aig Àrdgaoil Farr gach darna seachdamh agus bidh clann agus inbhith bhò Chathaibh agus Gallaibh a’ gheachd pàirt. Tha air Fèis air a bhith an-sàs ann am Pròiseact nan Taslann bhò thoiseach 2008, nuair a bh’ a bha buil na comataidh den bheachd gur e deagh chothrom a bhiodh ann sgìulachd an agus beul-aithris a’ chruinnachadh bhò mhuinntir na sgìre.

Sgorbh sinn gu mòran dhanainn san sgìre agus thug sinn cuireadh dhaibh a thiginn gu aonad de dhà fheasgar-chèilidh ann an taigh-òsda A’ Bhlàran Odhar anns an Dàmhair 2008. Bha ar pròiseact stèidhichte air na cuspairaitean sgìulachdan ionaidal mu chèilidhean, Gàidhlig agus clannain, cuide ri ionmaidhean air an airm agus iagachcan ann sgìre. Tha an leabhraín seo na thoiradh de dhà gàllamhann eadar com-pàrtichean na Fèise agus muinntir na sgìre a thàinig dha na feasgaran-chèilidh agus fhìshair sin cuid sgìulachdhan inntinnach a-mach asta. Re feasgaran na gàllamhann, bha fior deagh chaicean ann agus thàinig còmhla airson an t-òrain. Re feasgaran a thàinig dha na feasgaran-chèilidh agus fhìshair sin cuid sgìulachdhan inntinneach a-mach asta. Re feasgaran na gàllamhann, bha fior deagh chaicean ann agus thàinig còmhla airson an t-òrain.

Tha deallbhainn an ann a leabhraí de na daoine a bha an-sàs anns a’ pròiseact, seàlraidhean na sgìre, cuide ri deallbhainn a rinne gearraidh Bunsgoil Thunga. Thuig na deallbhainn seo a’ toirt seachadh ciall na ainmean-àite Gàidhlig.

As leth Fèis Air An Oir, bu toil leam taing mhòr a thoirt dha a h-uile duine a bha an-sàs anns a’ pròiseact agus a chuidiche le a bhith a’ cur an leabhraín seo ri cheile. Le taing shònraichd do Emily Edwards aig Fèisean nan Gàidheal airson a fhoighinn, stiùireadh agus cuideachadh.

Tha sinn an dochas gu cùrd e rith a bhith a’ leughadh agus ag ionnasachadh mu sgìre Fèis Air An Oir anns na laithean a dh’fhialbhach!

Carol-Anne NicAoidh, Fèis Air An Oir

Com-pàrtichean Fèisean Air An Oir:

Claire Reid, Tongue  Lynsey Rothach, Am Blàran Odhar
Ellie NicAoidh, Port Sgeire  Murchadha MacAoidh, Armadal
Erlin Cook, Am Blàran Odhar  Natasha NicAoidh, Strathaich
Uilleam MacAoidh, Inbhir  Torria Cook, Am Blàran Odhar
Theòrsa

Riochdaleirean Fèisean Air An Oir:

Carol-Anne NicAoidh  Mairi Cook
Seonaid NicAoidh  Mhairi NicAoidh
Jenna Reid  Sandra Rothach
Joan Ritchie  Tara Smart
Marissa Melville


About the project

Fèisean nan Gàidheal’s Archiving Project

Fèisean nan Gàidheal’s archiving project is aimed at encouraging Fèis participants from across Scotland to collect, record and present local heritage from their own area. Fèis Air An Oir runs fortnightly workshops in traditional music in Farr High School and children and adults from both Sutherland and Caithness attend. Our Fèis has been involved in the Archiving Project since the beginning of 2008, when committee members thought it would be great to take the opportunity to gather some stories and folklore from local people.

We wrote to many local people and invited them along to one of two ceilidh afternoons in the Bettyhill Hotel in October 2008. The theme of our project was local stories of ceilidhs, Gaelic and song, including references to the army and fishing life in the area. This booklet is the result of the interviews between Fèis participants and the local people who attended the ceilidh afternoons and some very interesting stories have emerged. During our interview afternoons, there was a great atmosphere and the events turned into informal ceilidhs with participants, committee members and informants joining together for tunes and songs!

The booklet is illustrated with photos of those involved in the project and of the local area including drawings by the pupils of Bunsgoil Thunga. These drawings portray the Gaelic meaning of local place names.

On behalf of Fèis Air An Oir, I would like to thank all the people who contributed to the project and made the production of this booklet possible. A special thanks to Emily Edwards from Fèisean nan Gàidheal for all her patience, guidance and help throughout.

We hope that you enjoy reading and learning about the Fèis Air An Oir area in times gone by!

Carol-Anne Mackay, Fèis Air An Oir

Fèis Air an Oir Participants:

Claire Reid, Tongue  Lynsey Munro, Bettyhill
Ellie Mackay, Portskerra  Murdo Mackay, Armadale
Erlin Cook, Bettyhill  Natasha Mackay, Strathy
Liam Mackay, Thurso  Torria Cook, Bettyhill

Fèis Air an Oir Representatives:

Carol-Anne Mackay  Mary Cook
Janette Mackay  Mhairi Magee
Jenna Reid  Sandra Munro
Joan Ritchie  Tara Smart
Marissa Melville

With thanks to The Bettyhill Hotel.

With special thanks to the informants for sharing their time and knowledge. Sadly, Teen Mackay passed away in April 2009 before the publication of this booklet.
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Anndra Rothach
Billy Gòrdan

Skerray, Bettyhill and Armadale

Interviews with:
Sandra Munro, Christine Mackay (Teen), Colin MacDonald,
Dolly MacIvor, Andy Munro, Billy Gordon
Natasha: Can you tell us a bit about where you were born and brought up? Sandra: I was born in my granny’s house in Scullomie in the parish of Tongue and I was there until I was two weeks old and then I went to Kirtomy where I was brought up.

Murdo: Where did you go to school? Sandra: My first year of school was at Kirtomy, it would have been 1945 I think, the last year of the war and the school was closed after that and everybody in Kirtomy and Swordly went to school in Bettyhill.

Natasha: How did you get to the school? Sandra: We were taken by car to school.

Liam: Do you come from a big family? Sandra: I have two brothers and two sisters so there’s five of us in the family.

Natasha: Did most members of your family speak Gaelic? Sandra: Yes, when I was growing up my granny and grandfather were alive and my grandfather never spoke in English to me but I was the oldest in the family and by the time my next sibling was three years old my granny and grandfather were both dead. My father was away at war and Gaelic wasn’t spoken much in the house then. I was the only one who had any Gaelic at all in the family, but I think everybody in Kirtomy spoke Gaelic. There’s a lot of people my age who spoke Gaelic who will tell you today that they don’t have a word of Gaelic but I can’t quite believe that.

Natasha: So did you speak much Gaelic out with the house? Sandra: Well, when we went to school in Bettyhill, you were kind of a joke if you spoke Gaelic. The people in Bettyhill were a little bit above speaking Gaelic and they laughed at the Kirtomy people who spoke Gaelic. So, with the result that eventually that at home when people spoke to you in Gaelic you answered in them English.

Liam: But now, probably most of the people who were in Bettyhill then wished they knew Gaelic now. Sandra: Yes!

Natasha: Now, was there much music in your house and in the family? Sandra: Yes, there was a lot of music in the village of Kirtomy. There was a lot of people who sang especially. Before the First World War Kirtomy was quite famous for pipe players, every house had a piper and at New Year, at Hogmanay, at the last stroke of twelve every piper stood outside their house and played. Even when I was growing up, there was still quite a few people playing the pipes or the chanter. My father would sit for hours playing the chanter but I never ever heard him play the pipes but he would play the chanter! One or two of the people of his age group that were living away would come home on holiday in the summertime and you would hear them playing outside their houses at night time, playing the pipes. There were quite a few accordion players too and a lot of singers, really good singers, with the result that they even had a Kirtomy cèilidh in 1957 that was broadcast.
Natasha: Did the pipers come together for cèilidhs?
Sandra: Oh yes, they did. They might not have been at home all at the same time because a lot of these men were away at sea or working away from home but the ones that were at home would be playing.

Murdo: Can you tell us any information about local cèilidhs when you were young?
Sandra: Well the first cèilidhs that I remember, and I must have been quite young because it was during the war and men would come home on leave, and women too and we used to have cèilidhs in the hall in Bettyhill. They were family affairs, everybody went to them. There would be a dance and also that way we learned all the old dances, the Petronellas, Lancers, the Flowers of Edinburgh, because all the older people always took you up to dance, however little you were, you were taken up to dance and shown how to do the dances.

Natasha: Were these dances ever in Kirtomy?
Sandra: Occasionally they were in Kirtomy because once the school was closed as a school they started using it to have little social evenings. Maybe if somebody had got married away from Kirtomy, you know, maybe they were living and working away and then they would come home after their honeymoon and they would have a cèilidh for them in the school house which were really nice affairs. It was all home baking and homemade soup and that, and it would go on well into the night! It was good!

Natasha: Were there lots of bands?
Sandra: There were local bands, I can’t remember exactly who was all in them but one person I remember in particular playing was you know Morris down at Naver, his father was Geordie Hamish, he was a fiddler and even at the Christmas parties they would have music, they’d have a wee dance. It was a really good affair the Christmas parties. Not like today, you’re there you get your present and you’re away – it went on for a good few hours and you got a dance out of it. When Geordie Hamish would be playing his fiddle, he watched everybody dancing and if you made one mistake he’d stop playing and get down and show you what you were doing wrong! And then it would start again. There was a man, I think he belonged to Durness but he was married to somebody here in Bettyhill and he played the button key accordion and he was really really good. There was the Melness Cèilidh band, which was going strong all through my youth. They had no big microphones and all that electronic stuff they have today so that when you got to the bottom of the hall, sometimes if it was very noisy you wouldn’t hear them playing so you had to diddle away to yourself until you got the music again! [laughing]

Liam: Do you speak any Gaelic?
Sandra: Oh yes, tha Gàidhlig agam! Tha mi a’ tuigsinn mòran ach chan eil mi a’ bruidhinn mòran.
Natasha: Glè mhath!

Murdo: Do you know any local songs or tunes?
Sandra: There are a lot of local songs but I don’t know all of them but I know someone who does! There was one really nice song, I think it was first of all said as a poem and somebody did put a tune to it, but I don’t remember it all. It was about Bettyhill:

“Tha mi a’ tuigsinn mòran [Ghàidhlig] ach chan eil mi a’ bruidhinn mòran.”

Natasha: Where would you have heard that?
Sandra: I can’t remember to tell you the truth but my father had a lot of songs and a lot of Gaelic songs too but I don’t really know them.

Natasha: Can you tell us about any local musicians that were in your area when you were younger?
Sandra: There was Donna Munro in Kirtomy who played the button key and Willie Naver, he played fiddle and pipes...Our headmaster in Bettyhill played the pipes and he was also quite a renowned Gaelic singer and scholar. He was a nephew of Ruairidh MacLeod of Elphin who was a Mod gold medallist and he sang the old Sutherland Gaelic songs. There was another man who had connections in Newlands and I only heard him a couple of times, I think he lived in London and his name was James Campbell and he was a Mod gold medallist way way back.

“Tha mi a’ tuigsinn mòran [Ghàidhlig] ach chan eil mi a’ bruidhinn mòran.”
Natasha: Other than some of the characters you’ve explained already, was there any other local characters who stood out?
Sandra: [laughter] It might be best not to mention some of them! There was some characters who stick in my mind as they weren’t too bright if you know what I mean. But they had some wonderful sayings that I wish I could remember better. There was this one in particular who came into the bar one night, this wee man and he said ‘it’s pouring down rain’ and one of the young blades said to him ‘Did you ever hear it pouring up rain?’ ‘Aye’ he said, ‘it’s raining up in Tongue.’ [laughing]

Murdo: Were there any of your family in the army?
Sandra: Well, I had uncles in the army, I had an uncle that was killed in the First World War and I had three uncles in the Second World War on my mother’s side. My father was in the Royal Navy and I also had a cousin in the Royal Navy during the war, he was on submarines. The majority of the Kirtomy men were sea going, they were in the Navy or the Merchant Navy.

Natasha: Did they tell you any stories?
Sandra: Not really, they weren’t really keen on saying very much the ones that came back after the war. Some of them, if they were thinking of something in particular they might say ‘Oh I was there.’ Like some of the men in Bettyhill that were in the 5th Seaforths and they fought at Monte Cassino and big battles like, that were well known. You just saw them going about their ordinary work thinking that they were ordinary guys that had never been very far and then they would say things like ‘Oh yeah, I was at the Battle of Monte Cassino’ and you would think ‘Oh my goodness! Were you really?!’ And there were sea battles too that a lot of them were on.

Liam: Do you have any fishing tales from your area?
Sandra: Tales? No I don’t think so but they were always telling us things like they’d seen mermaids and that but I don’t think they were true!

Liam: Were any of your family fishers?
Sandra: Yeah, my father was a fisherman. He was a very well known fisherman and he was maybe one of the best fishers in Scotland in his day. He came from whaling and just after the war he bought a fishing boat and he fished out of Scrabster.

Liam: What kind of whales were they catching?
Sandra: I’m not too sure but I think it was blue whales, before the war and after the war he was whaling.

Natasha: Was religion a big part of your village life and how has it changed?
Sandra: Oh yes, it was a big part and it has changed a lot. It’s much more light hearted I would say today, although not so many people go to church. It wasn’t a question on Sunday ‘Are you going to church?’ It was ‘You are going to church.’ You had to go to church. The minister came to the school at least twice a year when he would what they called ‘put the Catechism on you.’ You had to learn the Catechism by heart and you had to learn things like the Beatitudes and you had to know certain passages out of the Bible, mostly the Old Testament and the minister would come and shoot questions at you. He would also come to the house and if you knew the minister was on his rounds we would try everything we could to get out of it but we couldn’t usually get the chance to run away before the minister came! [laughing] Even if you met the minister on the road he would ask you something ‘Do you know what this passage or that was?’ or ‘what was the first commandment?’ or ‘the first Catechism or the seventh’ or whatever. So all these things you had to know by heart.

“It wasn’t a question on Sunday ‘Are you going to church?’ It was ‘You are going to church.’ You had to go to church…”
Liam: What happened if you didn’t know?
Sandra: Oh you got berated, you got a real row from the minister, from your mum and dad and from your granny! [laughing] Communion was a big thing, twice a year they had Communion and that meant that ministers came from other places. It started on Thursday, then Friday, Saturday, Sunday and Monday – that was Communion weekend. You went to church a lot, one day with the school, Thursday with the school and then you had Friday and Monday off Communion week...

Natasha: The local Highland Games that we know today are Halkirk and Durness but was there any in between that?
Sandra: Well, they weren’t exactly Highland Games but they had what we called sports day and it was run, that would have been after the war that started, by the British Legion and they were excellent. At one point they had them in the school, where the school is now but there wasn’t a school there then, in that park. And then they moved to Clerkhill and they... would get the Thurso and the Wick pipe band. They didn’t have throwing the hammer or any of these heavy things but there was Highland dancing and races. You know, there was the egg and spoon race and the sack race and these novelty races and the weather was always good! But apparently before, in my grandfather’s day they had Highland Games and someone who might be able to tell you about that is Margaret Mackay. She told me one time about my grandfather and John Brown from Newlands were very competitive, they were always competing. They used to have shinty every New Year on the sands in my grandfather’s day too.

Natasha: Do you think the Highland Games have changed in any way since you were younger?
Sandra: Well the dancers have certainly changed because when you see old photos of highland dancers, men and women, they wore huge sporrans down past their knees and feathers in their bonnets and I don’t know how they managed to dance at all!

Liam: What differences can you see from when you were younger to now with regard to Gaelic and music in the area?
Sandra: Well, the lack of Gaelic I guess is the biggest thing. On the North Coast our Gaelic was a bit different to what they speak in the islands, the vowel sounds were different. There are very few people left speaking North Coast Gaelic or as some people call it Rob Donn Gaelic! But my late husband, who was brought up in Melness but his people came from Lewis, had the advantage of knowing both and being able to speak in the Lewis Gaelic and the North Coast Gaelic. It’s not so different once your ears are tuned to it. And what the children are learning at school is a little bit different again and the accent is a little bit different so it takes a wee bit of getting used to what they are saying. It’s good that they are beginning to learn Gaelic and to get Gaelic in school because it may come up again but the North Coast Gaelic, with my generation will be gone but people have gone round to speak to the people who can remember words that are different. Like the word for a small boat, on the west coast they would say ‘bàta’, but we would say ‘culaidh’ which is just a different word for a small boat. There are a lot of words like that that are different but I suppose it’s the same in any language, that there are different dialects.

Natasha: Did you and your husband speak a lot of Gaelic in the house together?
Sandra: Not a lot. He was inclined to correct me! We did speak it sometimes yes.
Murdo: Where were you born and brought up?
Teen: I was born in Midtown, Farr, Bettyhill. I was born and brought up there.

Carol-Anne: So you’ve lived there all your life?
Teen: No, I was away in Edinburgh and different places working.

Carol-Anne: Where did you go to school and how did you get there?
Teen: I went to the old school in Bettyhill and we had to walk right over the sands summer or winter and it took about half an hour to get there with the big boots on.

Carol-Anne: And did you all walk together?
Teen: Aye we did, two or three lots of us.

Murdo: Do you come from a big family?
Teen: Six of a family – three sons and three daughters and I was the youngest of the daughters.

Murdo: Did your family speak Gaelic?
Teen: Yes mother and father spoke Gaelic all the time.
Murdo: Do you speak Gaelic yourself?
Teen: Not very fluent but I can speak bits of it and I can understand it.

Murdo: Was there music in your house when you grew up?
Teen: Yes there was an old gramophone playing records all day long.

Carol-Anne: What records or bands?
Teen: Oh I can’t remember now - Calum Kennedy – my father was great with him, and the boxies and the melodeon.

Carol-Anne: Did your father play that?
Teen: No, my brothers did they played it and the mouth organ.

Carol-Anne: Did anyone teach them?
Teen: No it just came, all the boys had a mouth organ and they’d be playing it outside. Local cèilidhs were in houses, they’d go from one house to the other and in the hall there would be a concert, there’d be the boxie, not very up to date bands like they have now but they did have bands. It started about nine or ten and went on dancing till four in the morning – then we had to walk back home over the sands after that.

Carol-Anne: Was that in the hall in Bettyhill?
Teen: Yes, and in the houses they’d have little cèilidhs – they’d be visiting each other and blethering away in Gaelic and English.

Carol-Anne: Would there be dancing at them as well?
Teen: Oh they’d be dancing once they got one or two! ...I can’t remember who was in the bands just anyone who was there would join in with an accordion or fiddle.

Carol-Anne: Did people sing or tell stories?
Teen: Oh yes. At Christmas time there was always parties and stories and Calum Kennedy was a great favourite – Màiri Bhàn – ‘Tha mi sgìth’.
Carol-Anne: What about local stories?
Teen: Local stories really would be about taking peats home. Well they used to go up to the hill with a cart and a tractor and a basket of food and they used to set a fire and have a nice lunch up in the hill and come back down and have a big pan of soup and tatties and herring and a bottle and have a dram after they got the peats cut. After that they would be setting them up and taking them home which meant that there was a big sort of dinner when they arrived back and there was a good ceilidh for the rest of the night.

Carol-Anne: Did the women do the peats as well?
Teen: Yes they did, after they were cut the women used to set up the peats. They set a fire up and had something to eat and each house joined in perhaps a dozen joined together and the one helped the other.

Carol-Anne: So was it a community type thing?
Teen: Yes, yes oh yes. And of course at New Year time it was a great time in each house we never went to bed on Hogmanay and it would be walking, we didn’t have as many cars. We used to walk from Swordly, Kirtomy and the table would be full of bottles, each one had a bottle they used to put names on the bottles so that they’d know their own one – it was an all night session – it’s not the same now.

Carol-Anne: And would there be one house in particular that folk would gather in?
Teen: Yes oh yes and our house was one, but it’s just one bottle they had – they couldn’t afford any more.

Murdo: Do you know any local songs or tunes?
Teen: I know plenty songs or tunes – do you mean Gaelic or English?

Carol-Anne: Anything that’s local to the area.
Teen: ‘Cailin mo ruin-sa’ and ‘Naver Bay’.

Carol-Anne: Was it mainly Gaelic songs that were sung?
Teen: Yes it was then in houses and in the hall...And the gramophone would be going with old Gaelic records I have plenty of them if you want some, Calum Kennedy and all.

Carol-Anne: When did you notice the change?
Teen: This last 20 years. I remember they used to buy their messages in the store it was all in Gaelic.

Carol-Anne: So that was the everyday language?
Teen: Yes – now we don’t hear it at all but it’s nice to think it’s coming back again with the young ones.

“My local stories really would be about taking peats home. Well they used to go up to the hill with a cart and a tractor and a basket of food and they used to set a fire and have a nice lunch up in the hill…”
Agallamh cómhla ri Cailean MacDhòmhnaill
Interview with Colin MacDonald

Torria: Can you tell me about where you were born and brought up?
Colin: I was born in the Isle of Skye and brought up there until I was the age of fourteen and then I went to sea.

Torria: When did you move to this area?
Colin: Oh the woman I married was from this area, from Farr. I came here in January 1959.

Torria: What can you tell me about crofting here? Have you always crofted since you moved here?
Colin: Well, yes a kind of crofting. Our money was scarce when we came and you had to have a job but you had to buy animals. It was a wee calfie I had first and I brought him up and at last we had five cows and calves when we got on our feet...We did have some lambs but we were unfortunate with some of them.

Torria: Could you tell me about the salmon fishing in Armadale?
Colin: Yes, I was at the salmon fishing and your late grandfather was with me to, your dad’s father...That was away back in the 70s.

Torria: Where did you work after the salmon fishing?
Colin: At Dounreay...I was in the stores.

Mary: When you first moved here, can you tell me about which church you would go to and the differences in the services from then to now?
Colin: I went to the Free Church...although I was at sea a lot and I didn’t bother about church too much. I was careless and indifferent but I knew I was a sinner and I needed to be born again you could say.

Mary: How have the services changed?
Colin: There is a big change but Jesus is still being preached. They are not so hard on the sinners as they were in the olden days. If you did anything wrong you had to be brought before the elders and that.

Mary: Are the congregation still the same?
Colin: Oh nothing like it. Hardly anybody will be there, only about fourteen the biggest at any time and down to about five sometimes.

Mary: How many would have been going in your day?
Colin: Oh about twenty-seven or something like that. But Professor MacMillan when he came to preach, to fill the vacancy, the same as they are doing now having locums to preach. He could fill the church with his preaching. The last time there was 164 in the church every day for about ten weeks. He was full of fun too although he was a preacher. He was preaching the word and I used to do the precenting for him and he used to be in the pulpit, I would have a place at the front to lead the singing and he used to say to me ‘You know how you can go wrong in tunes, and he used to say ‘if you go wrong there today I’ll come down on you from here!’ [laughing] There were things like that and it was fun.

Mary: How did you get to church, do you walk?
Colin: Well, there’s a story. I had a Morris 1000 but sometimes we used to walk to church...about over two miles taking the shortcut from Farr to Clerkhill over the sands...

Mary: Did you bring your daughter up to speak Gaelic?
Colin: Well yes, she understands bits yet. We would speak in Gaelic sometimes if we didn’t want her to understand, if it was private and she was too young to hear it.

Mary: It’s funny now that it’s the kids [learning Gaelic in school] that can speak the Gaelic and the parents can’t understand!
Colin: Yes I suppose it is, but it’s good though, it pushes the parents to get learning it too.

Torria: Did they [the children] used to get Gaelic at school?
Colin: Oh yes, the headmaster in Bettyhill was Donald MacLeod and he had Gaelic. He used to precent in the church too. Some of the teachers had some Gaelic.
“...when my father went to school they weren't allowed to speak the Gaelic...”

Agallamh còmhla ri Dolly NicIomhair
Interview with Dolly MacIvor

Liam: Can you tell me where you were born and brought up?
Dolly: In Farr.

Liam: And whereabouts did you go to school?
Dolly: The old school down in Bettyhill. Yes. That's the school we went to. There was three classrooms.

Emily: How many were in the school then? Or how many teachers?
Dolly: There wasn't many teachers. Teachers you have the day, there's more teachers than pupils! [laughing] Well I think there is when I see all the cars over there! I'm sure! We just had a teacher, a man teacher for the first room, then a lady teacher, then another lady teacher for younger ones.

Liam: How did you get there?
Dolly: With my two feet! I didn't get a bus or a car.

Liam: How long would it take you to go from your house to the school?
Dolly: Ach well, we could maybe do it in the summer time cause we'd be barefoot, we could run quicker. And we walked to school over the Farr sands, summer and winter. All weathers. Snow...but we got snow then but we don't get snow now. Some days we couldn't even come out of the house! The snow would block us. But we didn't go [home for lunch] that often cause we didn't really have much time cause we had to be back on the dot or we'd get the strap. That's another thing that's taken out, the strap, which shouldn't be and we wouldn't speak back to our teacher or you'd get a clip over the ear... Another thing was school dinners. We never got a school dinner. If you didn't have maybe a bit, something that you took from the house, you would have been all day without nothing. We got no dinners.

Janette: And when you went to school did you speak Gaelic there?
Dolly: Oh we had Gaelic in school.

Janette: So you were allowed to speak Gaelic at school?
Dolly: Yes.
Janette: Because when my father went to school they weren't allowed to speak the Gaelic.
Dolly: We had Gaelic, the teacher leant his Gaelic in the school but then we didn't keep it up.

Janette: Oh so you were taught Gaelic in the school?
Dolly: We had a Gaelic lesson one day a week.

Janette: Oh, so could you speak English then before that?
Dolly: Oh aye. When our parents spoke to us in Gaelic we answered them and we got a slap for that! [laughing] We were supposed to speak back in Gaelic which we didn't do.

Janette: Did you teach your family Gaelic?
Dolly: No.
Janette: Why was that?
Dolly: Because probably when we left home, we didn’t bother.

Liam: Did you come from a big family?
Dolly: Yes, there were seven of us.

Liam: Did your family speak Gaelic?
Dolly: Uh-huh. Well not the family I’ve got – I speak Gaelic, but not my family.

Liam: Was there music in your house when you grew up?
Dolly: Just a gramophone, nothing else... We all used to be in the house. We all gathered in the house and there was stories to tell, but there was no music.

Liam: Do you remember having house weddings?
Dolly: Well yes, it was in the house we had them then... and there would be a feast going on. Well we just had to cook, maybe five or six chickens and meat. We would just have a big spread in the house. Everybody gathered in the house and we just made our own music.

Emily: Was the actual ceremony held in the house?
Dolly: No, I don’t think so... I remember my mother plucking the chickens, the feathers would be everywhere you know. [laughing] And then they killed their own sheep, they had plenty of mutton because they killed their own sheep.

Janette: And you were in the army were you?
Dolly: Yes.

Janette: What division or what were you in?
Dolly: In the Air Force.

Janette: And what did you do?
Dolly: Driving.

Janette: What did you drive?
Dolly: Anything you were given!

Janette: Is that right? And were you driving ambulances?
Dolly: Yes. I’ve passed my test, the first time I ever drove I passed my test in a three tonne Bedford lorry! [laughing]

Janette: And where was that?
Dolly: Well, I was in England and I was in Scotland, stationed there.

Janette: And did you have any hair raising experiences with bombing or anything?
Dolly: Well I was in England in Coventry when they [The Nazis] came over and it was flattened to the ground, the whole of Coventry... Four years, I was in it for four years.

Janette: Were you? And then you came back to Bettyhill?
Dolly: Well, I got married when I was in the army, in the WAAFs.

Janette: And where did you get married?
Dolly: In Edinburgh.

Emily: And you were brought up in Farr you were saying?
Dolly: In a wee house with one room, seven of us.

Emily: And was it a croft?
Dolly: Aye. Well, not a big big croft but enough to keep two cows and sheep and we had our own milk, and our own butter and everything.

Emily: And did you make your own butter and cheese?
Dolly: Uh-huh. We did all that.

Emily: Can you remember doing that yourself?
Dolly: Yes. And we planted our own potatoes, turnip, cabbage. We grew all our own veg.

Emily: And you were saying that your father did a bit of fishing as well?
Dolly: Twice a year he went away, to Yarmouth and to Peterhead. Twice a year he would be away for three to four months.

Emily: That was a long time for him to be away.
Dolly: Yes but he had to. There was nothing else for it in them days.

“ Well yes, it was in the house we had [weddings] then... and there would be a feast going on. Well we just had to cook, maybe five or six chickens and meat.”
“I loved the days when the half bottle went in the back pocket and off you went to the dance and you hooched and you screamed and it was great fun ...”

Agallamh còmhla ri Anndra Rothach
Interview with Andy Munro

Lynsey: Where were you born and brought up?
Andy: I was born and brought up in Kirtomy. In 1957 I was born.

Lynsey: Is there anything about Kirtomy you’d like to share with us?
Andy: Kirtomy is a small fishing valley and the Kirtomy burn was our playground. We used to set nets in it, fish in it and had boats in it – boats as in rafts, that was our playground. I was told “Don’t go down to the bottom of the burn” – so where did we go? Down to the bottom of the burn! And every pool I fell in and going home soaking and getting hell!

Lynsey: Was there any other kids that lived in Kirtomy?
Andy: Yes, there was a guy called Charlie MacIvor but I called him Joe and he calls me Joe. There’s a reason for that. When we would get up to devilment – who would go do it – Joe Soap would have to do it – so that’s how the name came about. One night it was his turn and then it would be my turn. But today we just call each other Joe – so that’s where the name came from. The Sunday papers used to arrive at one house and this old guy would come on his bicycle and we’d let the air out of his tyres and he’d have to push it home. We were knocking on doors and running away, we shot a coileach [cockerel] one day by pure accident. We were shooting at him but we didn’t mean to hit him; and we shot the coileach! Alec MacIvor’s coileach. And Alec came out...and we said, “Oh there’s something wrong with the coileach.” “Something wrong with the coileach – his neck is full of lead!” he said. So the gun was taken off us. We were joy riding, used to steal a car – we were joy riding in Kirtomy. There was no people to run over though – yes we were at the joy riding way back in the late sixties!

Lynsey: Where did you go to school and how did you get there?
Andy: Our school was always Bettyhill School, but we started in the old school and we moved up to the new school. I think it was 1965. We were lost, we had a new playground and we didn’t know what it was but it taught us a lot of things. We were transported by Jack Munro’s bus and it was not a good service – we took loaves of bread, bottles of milk, we were doing deliveries on our way home!

Lynsey: Do you come from a big family?
Andy: I’m from a family of three which I would consider to be an average family.

Lynsey: Did your family speak Gaelic?
Andy: My granduncle spoke Gaelic all the time but my mother and father had bits and pieces of Gaelic – myself – no Gaelic whatsoever but I do understand some words.
Lynsey: Did your parents try to teach you any Gaelic or did you decide not to learn it?
Andy: I never had the chance of learning Gaelic. I went to school and we had a French teacher and he was trying to teach us French and I thought myself that Gaelic would be more appropriate but French was drummed into us – not Gaelic.

Lynsey: Was there any music played in your family?
Andy: There was music all the time. I grew up listening to Addie Harper and the Wick Scottish Dance Band, Bobby MacLeod, Fergie MacDonald, Robbie Shepherd, Hebbie Gray the great fiddle player, The White Heather Club – it was a great thing on the telly at the time – there was always music with me.

Lynsey: Was there anyone in your family that played an instrument?
Andy: My dad played the button key accordion – not that I heard him playing it often but I knew he played it. I always used to put it on and try to knock a tune out of it. I was no good at it in any way at all. When I was fourteen I got a piano accordion from Addie Harper which I could understand. I played by ear which was the old tradition.

Lynsey: Did you ever get lessons on the accordion?
Andy: I had no lessons as such. I did go to Bobby Coghill and he did teach me one tune – but no I never kept lessons up, I always played by ear.

Lynsey: When did you have lessons did you find it hard to learn by music?
Andy: Well it was extremely hard for me because I had my own way of fingering the keyboard and it was not proper that’s because I taught myself – and I couldn’t get out of my rhythm.

Lynsey: What do you think of the opportunity in music young people are getting today?
Andy: Absolutely brilliant – and keep it up because it’s something special.

Lynsey: You used to be in a band. What was that like and what did you get up to?
Andy: Yes we had a band going – we called it The Burach Band. We played all over the north and east and west of Scotland. We did many weddings – we played Fridays and Saturdays and sometimes Sunday. It was just absolutely brilliant – meeting new folk – it was something else. We always had craic, but the band had to pack in due to no work opportunities in the area. The fiddle player went to college, my mate on accordion sadly passed away and we all drifted apart. We are still in touch but we don’t play together any more. My late mate Hamish Carney played the five row button key but was a master on the mouth organ.

Lynsey: What were the dances like compared with today?
Andy: Oh well, when I grew up it was the old fashioned country dances. Today your popular music is taking over far too much to my liking. I loved the days when the half bottle went in the back pocket and off you went to the dance and you hooched and you screamed and it was great fun.

Lynsey: Were dances a regular thing or just a couple of times a year?
Andy: Oh no when I grew up there’d be perhaps three or four dances on in one night and today you get one dance a year – we were spoiled for choice – we didn’t know which dance to go to so we tried to go round them all and that wasn’t possible either.

Lynsey: Is there any other stories you’d like to share with me?
Andy: I have hundreds of stories but do you have the time to listen to me?

Lynsey: Yes – about your childhood or music or what you think of today?
Andy: We had a chore of cutting peat-sand, all our summer holidays we’d barrow peats, cutting peats, barrowing peats for the whole summer holidays. Today folk don’t know about that way of life – with oil central heating that things have gone.
Ellie: Can you tell me about where you were born and brought up?
Billy: I was born and brought up in Aird - you can just about see the house from here [Bettyhill Hotel]. That's Aird over there.

Carol-Anne: Were you born in the house Billy?
Billy: Yes, I was born in the house yes. I've been there most of my life except a wee short while I was in the Merchant Navy.

Ellie: Where did you go to school?
Billy: I was at school in the old Farr school in Bettyhill, it was a primary and then I went to Helmsdale higher grade. We walked to school in Bettyhill, it's not that far. We were in lodgings in Helmsdale, we went after the summer holidays and we got a weekend break when the Sacraments were in Helmsdale. Actually, they were the same time in Helmsdale as they were in Bettyhill and so we got off for the weekend and then back and we were there till Christmas. Then, I think we went right through from Christmas 'til Easter.

Ellie: Wouldn't like that!
Billy: Oh I loved Helmsdale! I was practically reluctant to come home - the only problem was the school - it would have been fine if I didn't have to go to school! [laughing] ...I was there for four years and I think I was sixteen when I left.

Ellie: Did you miss Bettyhill at all when you were away?
Billy: No, not at all! I missed my parents a bit but I found it so dull coming back to Bettyhill ... I thought I would never stay there but I did! My parents wrote to me but I didn't say much...I would tell them 'there's nothing much going on here' but one time I was caught out, I took measles and I didn't make it home so I was stuck in the lodge and my mother came down and the landlady told her all the mischief I'd been up to!

Ellie: Did your family speak Gaelic?
Billy: Yes, the funny thing was, my father and mother spoke Gaelic all the time but they spoke English to me.

It seems daft now thinking back to it but it's not that they were against Gaelic, my father would be delighted now if he knew what was going on with schools and that, but they thought wrongly that it would make me a bit backward for when I was going to school which was the wrong thing. My father couldn't speak English when he went to school. It was a pity because my granny was living when I was very young and she spoke Gaelic all the time to me...I didn't learn Gaelic, it was always there like English and my neighbours spoke Gaelic to me most of the time and there was no problem like that. I think though, when they spoke English to me, it makes it difficult for me to speak Gaelic to my grandchildren that go to the Gaelic medium school. It's difficult because they say speak Gaelic to them and I'll speak a few words but then I revert back to English...And their school Gaelic is a bit different to the Gaelic we had here.

“...my father and mother spoke Gaelic all the time but they spoke English to me.”

Agallamh còmhla ri Billy Gòrdan
Interview with Billy Gordon
Ellie: Was there music in your house when you grew up?
Billy: No, apart from the radio. My father and mother didn’t play any music and my mother’s side wasn’t musical. My father might have been a bit but he never bothered you know. My two uncles played the fiddle and my Uncle Sandy, he made his own fiddle. He stayed in Rosal, himself and your [Carol-Anne] grandfather was in company, Gordon and Mackay, they did an awful lot of houses in Portskerra...

Ellie: Can you tell us any information about local cèilidhs in the area when you were young?  
Billy: Well there was cèilidhs for singing and music in the hall, mostly in Gaelic. There was well known Gaelic singers coming round. There was probably the most famous and best Gaelic singer was Kenny Macrae. He actually trained in one of the big operas in Italy. There was local singers and musicians and that who were very good. For stories, you wouldn’t get much of that there but my father had an awful lot of stories.

Ellie: Were there a lot of bands that came to play in Bettyhill?
Billy: It was local musicians who got together. They didn’t charge or anything, they just got together and played...Probably the first sort of local band that played professionally was the Melness Band which was very very good.

Carol-Anne: Who was in that?  
Billy: Well, Joseph Mackay, he was the head man in it and he sang and played the fiddle and his wife played the piano. There was a fellow Donnie Campbell...and another fellow...from Melness...There might have been somebody else in it, it would maybe vary a wee bit sometimes. There was another thing came round which was what you might say was the early days of the disco music. There was a fellow from Skerray and... he bought this ex-army equipment and he came round and he played music on it. It was a great big green painted box, all buttons and lights on it! It was quite good too but then bands from other places came and the profit wasn’t so good for the hall committees and that, they had to pay most of their takings on these big bands, the professional bands.

Carol-Anne: And would people be dancing the Gay Gordons and that?
Billy: Och there was more complicated ones than that, Quadrilles and Lancers and God knows what all! I couldn’t really do them, they were very tricky...a lot of formations and you had to learn it well to be in it. There used to be maybe three [sets] of eight or more in the hall and it was really good up near the music, then the next ones weren’t quite so good and the ones at the bottom then were crashing into each other! [laughing]

Carol-Anne: So the music wouldn’t have been amplified?
Billy: Och no but the hall was small, it was the old tin hall that was blown down. Of course there was no license in the hall then and everybody had their half bottles and they would stash them in places! There would be ventilators, dry stone ventilators that the hall sat on and people would be shoving their half bottles in there. There were constant threads going out and in the hall!

Ellie: Did you learn dancing in school?
Billy: We got a little of it in higher grade. Even during the war they had quite a good Christmas dance there...and the drill teacher taught us dancing which I wasn’t very good at! I liked it but it wasn’t a thing I ever mastered awfully good! [laughing]
Ellie: Have you got any stories about Gaelic in the area?
Billy: Most of the stories I learned were from my father in English but it reverted back to Gaelic. Most of the old stories, like there was a deck-load of timber came in through the night on a Sunday evening on Farr sands, something like the story of ‘Whisky Galore’, but they didn’t have clocks and they weren’t very sure of the time. They were sitting in a house just along from us there and they were waiting on the tide, it was dark, probably winter time and there was one woman who said her cockerel always crowed at four o’clock in the morning so it must be four o’clock. There was this elder there and he said ‘No, we mustn’t forget our religion’. There was a poem made about it and it went:

Thuír Bantrach Nic Asaigil
Bradag casgach cuagach
Guireil a’ chothach agamsta
Nuair a bhà a ceithir uairean
Nis, ní thuirt Uilleam Sheòrais
Bhad cuimhne air a’ cheathramh aithne
Mas e an nàmhaid buaidh oirnn

Now that is, she was agitating them to go because the cockerel crowed at four o’clock in the morning, but the elder says well, young George says ‘Now now, we mustn’t forget the fourth commandment in case the Devil will get the upper hand of us.’ There was things like that. Another story he had was just at the same house where that was taking part, but it was a row of houses that was in it, thrown up quickly after the evictions, you know, they wouldn’t have land or anything. They made their own whisky if there was ever a wedding or a funeral...and they made it the night before for the next morning. So, on this occasion they made a batch of whisky and they were sitting down, there was a wake in it, and they started on the whisky and they drank it all. They had to make another batch the morning of the funeral! [laughing]

Carol-Anne: When you were younger Billy, were there people your age speaking Gaelic?
Billy: There was some, John Naver and myself would speak Gaelic... The store now, which is Coopers, it was mostly all Gaelic that was in that shop...The Post Office wasn’t so... Some parts of Bettyhill had more Gaelic than others, Aird and that had Gaelic a lot when I was young and when you went over to Farr and Clerkhill, but the rest of Bettyhill had Gaelic but to a lesser extent. The ones from Newlands and that side tended to go to the Post Office, more of them spoke English although they had Gaelic.

Carol-Anne: And what about at school? You were taught through English?
Billy: Oh yes aye. Although the teacher in Bettyhill, Miss Mackintosh and she was a Gaelic speaker and then, what we called the big end, was Mr MacLeod and he was a Gaelic speaker from Elphin. We only had him for a very short time ‘cause he went away to the army during the war and Miss Mackintosh was upgraded to head mistress. Even in Helmsdale, the headmaster was from Golspie and he spoke Gaelic and the deputy head was from Kinlochbervie way and he spoke Gaelic.

Carol-Anne: But they didn’t use it much in school?
Billy: No, the headmaster used to make cracks and that about the North Coasters!

Carol-Anne: Were the church services in Gaelic?
Billy: Yes, aye. The ministers were nearly always from the islands although we were in the Free Church and the minister was from Kirtomy, Angus Mackay and his wife was from Kirtomy, she was one of the Ross’s from Kirtomy. They were Gaelic speakers and it was all Gaelic services then.

Ellie: Do you remember going into people's houses for ceilidhs?
Billy: Not a lot, but there wasn’t a lot of music in our neck of the woods. We went round the houses and that... New Year was a bit different, I would burst into song then and that! But that was about it.

Ellie: Do you know any local songs?
Billy: ...There was rhymes, there was one about the Duke of Sutherland’s son was standing for parliament against Angus Sutherland from Portgower who was representing the crofters. There was a poem supposed to be the supporters of the Duke of Sutherland something about ‘Fichead mile air do chulaibh a’ cumail cùis na croitearan’ The one supporting the Sutherland was ‘The marquis as he should be at the head of the poll’ which is his position, and then he says ‘not to lose heart, there will be twenty thousand at your back for taking the cause of the crofters.’ There was a lot more to it. There was another song about the Onega that was wrecked at the Kyle of Tongue but it was in English. There’s very little of it I can remember now:

‘A finer ship you could never see, Than the stately Onega from Dundee, If you sail from Tongue to Princemore, A finer ship you’ll never see, Than the stately Onega of Dundee.’

She was caught in a storm and she went in at Coldbackie Sands and they were all drowned.

Ellie: Can tell us about any local musicians that were in your area when you were younger?
Billy: Yes, there was George Mackay in Naver, he was known as Geordie Hamish. He played fiddle and his father, Dòmhnall Sheumais and his brother Alec had the hotel. The grandfather moulded himself on Scott Skinner and apparently Scott Skinner always had his fiddle tuned before he went on stage – everything was ready, you know. And if Dòmhnall Sheumais was going to play at a concert he had his fiddle all tuned up and Geordie of course was a joker same as his son and he went over and round the back and gave it a wee tweak! He was a very serious man, I don’t really remember him although he lived in my town and he went on apparently, he was on stage and he went “guueerrrr!” [laughing]
Carol-Anne: Would you like that Ellie? Ellie plays the fiddle.
Billy: You’ll have to watch that nobody interferes with it!

Ellie: Were there any other local characters?
Billy: I think the main one in my time was Frankie. He was half of the travelling folk, I think his mother was one of the Williamson and he lived over in Crask. His mother died when he was quite young so he was kind of running wild. He used to get up to all kinds of tricks and he was dodging the school and there was then a ‘whipper in’, an official who was called the attendance officer and he lived across from Frankie. He was forever chasing up Frankie for not going to school so one of the tricks that Frankie did on him was, the man had a cow and she must have been quite a quiet cow and he milked the cow outside but there was no milk, the man was wondering how the cow had no milk. This cow had a red calf and Frankie managed to get hold of the calf somehow and he white washed it! [laughing] The man was looking for this calf and there was this white calf coming in his byre but he couldnae find his own calf! But och yes he had lots and lots of tricks! Another trick was that...he didn’t have much money and he wanted to buy a mouth organ. He was musical, the travelling folk are quite musical, pipers and that, so he fancied a mouth organ but he didnae have any money. So he came up to the shop this day and he was quite oot o’ breath when he went in and he says to Forbie, ‘Davie Clachan has sent me up for a mouth organ and he’ll pay it himself when he comes up at night.’ It was so realistic she gave him the mouth organ and off Frankie went with it. When Davie came up, it was Saturday and Davie and Jimmy and Geordie and that always went up to the pub but first of all they would call at the shop for their fags. Forbie says ‘Oh yes and you’ve got three shillings and sixpence for the mouth organ too.’ ‘What mouth organ??’ he says. [laughing] ... I could go on and on about the things that Frankie did!

Carol-Anne: And what about fishing? Do you do much?
Billy: Just lobsters. Between others and myself we had a small yawlie. But the lobsters were cleaned out then by big boats from Orkney, they cleaned out all the lobsters at that time you know. We were doing fine before that.

Ellie: What differences can you see from when you were young and now with regard to music and Gaelic?
Billy: Well, there’s far more music. See, when I was young there was a thing that if you spoke Gaelic that was old fashioned and it was rubbish and that. There was a generation who came through with that attitude but that attitude is not in it now. Certainly the music, there’s more of it and it’s more encouraged which is great. With the learning Gaelic, it’s very difficult to expand it, you know, in this area anyway.

Ellie: Is there anything else you would like to tell us about?
Billy: There was a big thing here, in the end of the 1800s the land league. It was like a people’s kind of union, here in the Highlands and in Ireland, it was against the proprietors and that. There was MPs and people like that at the head of it and there was a big meeting of it here at one time and there was a picture of it came into my possession. It was taken here, outside the grounds here and I put it down to the museum eventually, it’s down there. They had big rallies and things and there was a little boy at the time and there was a crowd of them going to this rally and they had flags, land league flags and this was before the bridge was built at Naver, there was a chain boat ferry there and this small boat for foot passengers. It was awkward, it was like the Duke of Sutherland or that that operated the ferry. So they said, the ones in the ferry house, ‘Well we can take you across but not with the land league flags. You mustn’t have the flags.’ They were frightened of losing their job. So the boys held out and they said ‘We’re not going without the flags!’ So they went up and across. They were determined.

Sgeiridh
(rocks in the sea)
Skerray
Le Lexy Nic ‘Ill Eathainn
Port Sgeire, Mealbhaich agus Srathaidh

Agallamhan còmhla ri:
Joan Ritchie
Donaidh MacAoidh
Benny Manson
Ealasaid NicAoidh
Peigi Hambleton
Suzie Smeaton
Seònaid NicAoidh
Robin MacAoidh

Portskerra, Melvich and Strathy

Interviews with:
Joan Ritchie, Donnie Mackay, Benny Manson, Elizabeth Mackay, Peggy Hambleton, Suzie Smeaton, Janette Mackay, Robin Mackay
Natasha: Where were you born and brought up?
Joan: I was born in Glasgow and partly brought up in Portskerra. I came here in all my school holidays and lived with my grandparents during the war and started school there in Portskerra school.

Carol-Anne: Where about in Glasgow did you live?
Joan: We lived near Shields Road Underground – it’s not there now, it was all knocked down for the Kingston Flyover – it’s quite sad really. I used to go to Scotland Street School which is a Rennie Mackintosh preserved building.

Natasha: Did your family speak Gaelic?
Joan: Yes, when I lived in Portskerra during the war with my grandparents we never spoke English in the house and my mother couldn’t speak English when she went to school which would be about 1910/1911 – of course then they were not allowed to speak it in school they had to speak English.

Carol-Anne: Did you move to Portskerra because of the war?
Joan: I was evacuated there and then I went back to Glasgow after that though and lived in Glasgow.

Carol-Anne: When did you move back to Portskerra?
Joan: We moved up in 1972 and lived in Portskerra.

Natasha: Was there music in your house when you grew up?
Joan: I can’t remember much music in Portskerra. I mean there was the wireless which you were only allowed to put on for the news because there were batteries in it and you had to save them. You weren’t allowed it on a Sunday at all. There was always music in the house in Glasgow, my mother and father didn’t play anything but there were records and that type of thing and ceilidhs if we had visitors.

Carol-Anne: Would it be Highland music?
Joan: Yes, no modern stuff at that time.

Murdo: Can you tell us about local ceilidhs?
Joan: Yes, there was always ceilidhs and dances in the village hall probably every weekend. Then you’d have entertainers like Calum Kennedy and Robert Wilson – people before your time!

Carol-Anne: Did they all come to Melvich?
Joan: Yes, probably Strathy as well, but they all came to Melvich.

Natasha: Were there any local bands?
Joan: Probably but I can’t remember the names of them. Well there would be local people getting together, not big bands like Jimmy Shand. There would be ceilidhs in the houses if there were visitors, most houses would have a fiddle or a mouth organ – things that weren’t so expensive – there wasn’t a lot of money.

Carol-Anne: Was there Gaelic singing?
Joan: Oh yes, but at that time there was a lot of Gaelic because no one spoke English in the house. But my mother never spoke it to me because my father never spoke it – this is where it started to die out – unless of course we had visitors. So that was the start of it dying out.

Agallamh còmhla ri Joan Ritchie
Interview with Joan Ritchie

“There would be cèilidhs in the houses if there were visitors, most houses would have a fiddle or a mouth organ…”

Mealbhaich (bent grass bay)
Melvich
Le Anna Magee

Joan Ritchie
Natasha: Was it just spoken in the house or did you hear Gaelic in the community?
Joan: Well everyone spoke it in the house and outside at that time – all the adults spoke it and there are still a few around of my age who can speak it but don’t.

Carol-Anne: Do you get the opportunity to speak Gaelic now – just in the choir is it?
Joan: Just in the choir that’s all.
Carol-Anne: Sad isn’t it.
Joan: Yes it’s sad but that’s when it died out when the likes of my mothers age were told not to speak it and they didn’t carry it on.

Carol-Anne: It’s not that long ago really is it?
Joan: No its not – just the last fifty or sixty years really which is such a pity.

Natasha: Were any of your family in the army?
Joan: My grandfather was in the army in the First World War – during the Second World War, I had two uncles in the Navy and one in the Air Force – a large family on my mother’s side.

Natasha: Did they come back and tell you stories?
Joan: I don’t think they liked to speak about it. Two of them were prisoners of war so they didn’t like to speak about it – well out of four boys three came back so we were quite lucky really.

Natasha: Is there any fishing tales?
Joan: Fishing was part of everyday life. My grandfather worked on The Coblei in the summer time and they had sheep and a cow and a croft – that was how they sustained their livelihood. I can’t remember being short of anything. I mean you always had your own meat, milk, butter, eggs, I don’t remember anyone being hungry – people in the towns probably were, in the big towns.

Carol-Anne: What about the women did they work?
Joan: Yes, they worked hard on the croft all the year round – the women did in the summer when the men were at the salmon fishing you had to do it because you had to get the hay done and all these jobs, the lambing and of course work at the peats.

Carol-Anne: Would the children help?
Joan: Yes, it was quite good fun, quite an idyllic life actually – didn’t wear shoes which was a wonderful treat for me coming from the town – I don’t remember weather like that now and you could go down to the harbour or beach until ten o’clock at night.

Carol-Anne: Must have been different, coming from Glasgow?
Joan: It really was – it was wonderful – hence I wanted to come back.

Natasha: Did you come back after you got married?
Joan: Yes.

Natasha: Was religion a big part of village life?
Joan: Yes, very big. We walked over to Strathy to the church every Sunday ...and walked back again, then sometimes there would be a service in the school on a Sunday night and if there was then you went to it. “The Books” as it’s called – The Bible – was said every night, in Gaelic. We weren’t allowed to stay up except on a Saturday night which was our treat of the week – for the “Books” – we couldn’t understand it all of course but sat there and listened to it.

Carol-Anne: And who would read “The Books”?
Joan: My grandfather.

Carol-Anne: And did the rest just sit around and listen, was it always him?
Joan: Oh yes it was always him.

Carol-Anne: And would this be happening every night?
Joan: Yes, oh yes. It wasn’t called the Bible, it was “The Books” but my cousin and myself – she was evacuated too – we only stayed up on a Saturday night – that was our treat for the weekend.

Natasha: Was the school the same one as it is now?
Joan: No, it was in front of the one that’s there now, right on the edge of the road and it faced onto the road in Portskerra. It was still there when the new school was built behind it so actually the playing field now is where the school was.

Carol-Anne: How long since they built the new school?
Joan: Well wait till I think now. Fiona was about seven when we came up here and that was in 1972. I think it would have opened in 1974.

Natasha: How many were in the school when you were in it?
Joan: About ninety. Yes and I remember Donnie Gen [MacKintosh] saying if you went down the low road, in a circle of about seven houses there were over forty children and they never went anywhere else to play, they never went outside their own little area.

Natasha: What differences do you see now from when you were young with regards to music and Gaelic and such?
Joan: Well Gaelic really in Melvich is non-existent – sadly that is the case – people like Lal will still know it but there’s nobody that I know speaks it.

Carol-Anne: When you were young if you went up the village would people generally speak Gaelic to each other?
Joan: Oh yes, everybody – well not my age but the older folks – yes, all Gaelic, so that’s only in the last fifty or sixty years Gaelic has died out- maybe not even as long as that – because they never carried it on.

Carol-Anne: They believed it was detrimental to your education didn’t they?
Joan: That’s right.
Carol-Anne: It’s amazing how it’s disappeared. 
Joan: It’s just disappeared- yes. And music of course – there was no pop music – wasn’t even heard of. The first pop music I heard was on radio Luxenburg – you won’t know anything about that. In Glasgow you stood with the radio to your ear every night because there was bad reception – that was the first pop music.

Carol-Anne: Who was the Bard? 
Joan: The Bard – he was a character yes, wrote wonderful poems about local people – when they had perhaps fallen or come out of the pub and at one point there was a cow got into Melvich Hotel kitchen and he wrote a poem about that – he had wonderful poetry. His daughter Georgie who lives in Thurso will have it all. I have some photos he gave me of the school children with no shoes on. He was such a wonderful person really and so knowledgeable and probably had little education probably left school at fourteen but could write all these poems and songs. 

Carol-Anne: Did he sing them? 
Joan: Yes and he used to have a white ferret – he used to take it for a walk on a lead like a dog.

Carol-Anne: How long ago since he passed away then? 
Joan: Ten to twelve years maybe.

Carol-Anne: But there’s a book published isn’t there? 
Joan: Yes a team came up from Edinburgh University and interviewed him and the book was produced. I have one in the house. Another interesting thing here were three boat drownings down at Portskerra in the 1800s. There’s a plaque down there and one of the widows wrote this poem in Gaelic because her husband was one of the men drowned and it’s translated into English on the other side. It’s down at the harbour.

Natasha: There’s a picture in the middle. Joan: Yes that was late 1800s early 1900s. There was a big swell and the boats were just in the bay but couldn’t get in. And there was another one down in the east end of Portskerra. I think it was a Norwegian boat and there’s two or three graves there of bodies that came in.

Natasha: Really? 
Joan: There’s a plaque and two or three headstones down there. David O’Brien has it fenced off because it’s on his croft but there’s a stile you’ve got to go over to get down there now.

Carol-Anne: And what about the Melvich choir? 
Joan: The Melvich choir – oh yes. Carol-Anne: Its called the Melvich choir but there’s hardly anyone from Melvich in it now. Joan: Sadly there isn’t but the history is really theirs....I was in the original choir for thirty years from the beginning.

Carol-Anne: So who started it? 
Joan: Well it started in 1975 there was something on in the hall and they put posters up to see if anyone was interested in a choir. Then they met in the school but as usual it was all women no men turned up so they decided to make it a ladies choir that was in 1975, Jan Cowan became the conductor and then in 1978 there was a choir in Thurso – the Pentland choir and they disbanded and some of them approached us to see if they could join our choir so then it became a mixed choir because they had men. After Jan Cowan finished a lady called Mary Campbell from Skye who lived in Barrock became our conductor and we did very well with Mary – she was very very strict, if she said no books on Tuesday you did not dare go with a book.

Carol-Anne: Are you still together? 
Joan: Yes that’s right but we need young voices – we get people to come to it but once they leave school they go away to college and so then you’ve lost them.

Carol-Anne: Where do they practice? 
Joan: In the school in Melvich.

Carol-Anne: Why did you leave the choir? 
Joan: Well my friend and I thought we’d leave before they asked us to!! But we are going to join them for a fund raiser for the Thurso National Mod.
Natasha: Now Donnie can you tell me where you were born and brought up?
Donnie: I was born in Dunbar Hospital in Thurso and I was brought up in Portskerra.

Natasha: Where did you go to school and how did you get to the school?
Donnie: Melvich, I walked.

Natasha: Now, was there many in the school?
Donnie: There was ninety in the school, when I was in it...There was thirty down in our little room.

Jenna: Were they all from Melvich?
Donnie: Oh yes, they were all from Melvich yes.

Natasha: Did most of your family speak Gaelic?
Donnie: No, no Gaelic spoken no.

Natasha: Can you tell us any information about local ceilidhs when you were young?
Donnie: Oh there were plenty of ceilidhs in it when I was young but they were always in the houses. There used to be a house on the shore, you’d go down to and it’d be full of men and they’d be all speaking in Gaelic and getting me to go to the hotel for a bottle of whisky for them. They’d all get speaking then and there’d be a wee bit o’ a singsong at times.

Jenna: Did you play the box at them at all?
Donnie: Well no, well I played the box way back about fifty year ago.

Natasha: Were there a lot of bands... playing locally?
Donnie: Oh yes there were plenty bands. From Reay, there was the Reay band, Wick bands coming up.

Natasha: Now have you any stories about Gaelic in your area and can you remember it being spoken much?
Donnie: Oh well there was a few houses, you know, you went round the houses and there was plenty of them speaking Gaelic but you didn’t understand what they were saying, some of the things!

Jenna: And were there parties at Christmas and New Year?
Donnie: Oh yes, New Year was a busy busy time...I’ve seen forty in the old house I stayed in Hogmanay night! And it was all singsong. In fact, I have a tape of them all in the hoose singing the songs...There’s a lot of them. A lot of people on it and a lot Gaelic songs on it too.

Natasha: Now can you tell us about any local musicians that were in your area when you were younger?
Donnie: Aye, Donnie Gen, he was a great musician. He played everything. In fact that’s where the ceilidhs were held that I have tapes of, in his house.

Jenna: What instrument did he play?
Donnie: He played the organ and he played the violin. He had six of them up on the wall.

Jenna: Hanging up ready to play?
Donnie: Hanging up yes. And the organ that he got I think cost about a couple o’ thousand pound.

Jenna: And where is his fiddles now? Does someone have his fiddles?
Donnie: Oh they’re away now, I don’t know where they went. It all died with him.

“...Any tunes that I was playing was off Jimmy Shand’s records and Ian Poirie and Bobby MacLeod…”

“Agallamh cómhlacht Donaidh MacAoidh
Interview with Donnie Mackay”
Natasha: Was there any other local characters that stood out from the rest?
Donnie: Oh there was plenty of them! [laughing]... Pension day would be a Monday and they used to go to the bar, and when they’d be coming down from the bar they’d go to the shop to pay their groceries. And Jessie in the shop would ask them, ‘How are you the day Donald?’ ‘Oh stepping high!’ [laughing] ‘Och stepping high!’ There was this other old man...and he would be coming down and going into the shop ‘How are you the day Angus?’ ‘Well oiled!’ [laughing]

Natasha: Now, were you or any of your family in the army and do you have any stories related?
Donnie: No, I was never in the army no. My sister was in the army, in the ATS [Auxiliary Territorial Service], she was a Sergeant Major and she went all over.

Natasha: Did she come back and tell you any stories?
Donnie: Not very much no. They didnae like speaking about it.

Natasha: Now, do you have any fishing tales from your area and were there any fishers in your family?
Donnie: Oh plenty of fishers yes. My two uncles were fishers and my brother was fishing. I would have to rise on a Sunday night and...well I would sit there at twelve o’ clock shelling two big pots of limpets for baiting the small lines.

Jenna: That’s a hard job!
Donnie: It was a hard job yes. And then they went off to sea but they didn’t go on a Sunday. It was haddock and cod and just the same as in Shetland. Everything was ashore on a Sunday, they didn’t go to sea until Monday morning, perhaps two or three in the morning before they went off.

Natasha: The most local Highland Games that I know of is probably Durness and Halkirk, was there any more local ones?
Donnie: No, well, there did used to be a games in Melvich but that was away back a long time ago. And there used to be a sale at Melvich, a cattle sale and sheep sale. Melvich market, where the hotel is, where the trees are in front of the hotel.

Natasha: Do you know of any reason why that stopped?
Donnie: Oh well, I suppose they got Forsinard sales going then, there was two sale rings in Forsinard and in Thurso.

Natasha: What differences can you see from when you were young to now with regard to music?
Donnie: Och big differences...Any tunes that I was playing was off Jimmy Shand’s records and Ian Powrie and Bobby MacLeod and all that ones.

Jenna: Do you think that there is different tunes that are played now?
Donnie: Och there’s different tunes altogether. It’s just the same as Aly Bain and Phil Cunningham, we had them in Strathy Hall there and they were very good. It’s all new tunes though.

“My two uncles were fishers and my brother was fishing. I would have to rise on a Sunday night and...well I would sit there at twelve o’ clock shelling two big pots of limpets for baiting the small lines.”
Fèis Air An Oir           23

Natasha: Benny, can you tell me a bit about where you were born and brought up?
Benny: I was born in Edinburgh actually and after Edinburgh we were in Brora for a while and then when the war came along we came up to Strathy. My father went to the army, he had no option he had to go to the army. After Strathy we were back in Edinburgh for about a year and then back to Brora and that was my last trip to Edinburgh.

Natasha: So where did you go to school and how did you get there?
Benny: Well, that’s a good question. I went to school in Edinburgh and when I was in Brora I went to the Brora school. There was only one school in Brora but of course when I was in Strathy I had my choice of schools!

Liam: Did your family speak any Gaelic?
Benny: Well, I’m not sure. My mother had some Strathy kind of Gaelic or Portskerra Gaelic but I don’t think it was very good Gaelic.

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Liam: Did your family speak any Gaelic?
Benny: Well, I’m not sure. My mother had some Strathpeffer and he recently has been in charge of the Dingwall Gaelic choir, he’s been the conductor for them. He was a relation of the same guy that was in the band on the button key accordion, they were related somewhere along the line.

Liam: Were you or any of your family in the army?
Benny: Yes, I was in the army, my father was in the army and my uncle was in the army, Bobby, he belonged right here but his name is on the war memorial because he was killed in the army.

Carol-Anne: When did you come to Strathy? Let’s get to the important bit!
Benny: I think it was 1940 after Edinburgh and then Brora.

Carol-Anne: Why were you in Brora?
Benny: My father belonged to Brora... He was a banker and he was a hookey and then he was in the army of course. He did the whole stint in Burma and he had the pub [in Brora] when he came home and it was a good wee pub, well I suppose all pubs are good! Never came across a bad one yet, depending on the thirst of course.

“People were fit in those days. Thirteen eightsome reels I played for that night!”

Agallamh còmhla ri Benny Manson
Interview with Benny Manson

Natasha: Benny, can you tell us any information about local cèilidhs?
Benny: Cèilidhs?...Most of the local cèilidhs that I was at when I was young was in Brora... I played with a little band Geordie Menzies played the button key accordion and Margaret White played the piano accordion and Willie Cummings was on the drums and I was on the pipes. We used to go around and play in the little places like the Doll in Brora and Gordonbush and Loth, Portgower, Kildonan, Kinbrace all the little places, good places.

Natasha: So it would have been good craic?
Benny: Well, yes. There was no set time for the cèilidh to start and there was no finishing time. It was just as long as people were prepared to dance around or whatever.

Natasha: Other than the ones that were in the band with you, can you tell us about any local musicians in the area?
Benny: There was one, Hamish Menzies. Hamish moved somewhere, down to Dingwall I think, or
Carol-Anne: Where was your mam from?
Benny: Well, I think she was actually born in Portskerra...I don’t know how she wound up in Strathy to be quite honest with you because my grandfather came from Armadale.

Carol-Anne: So then you came back to the house that you’re in now with your mam and dad?
Benny: No, you’re a wee bitty ahead of yourself now because I went off to Canada after I was in the army...I was brought up partly in Brora and partly in Strathy and a wee hit in Edinburgh but I’ve not been back to Edinburgh since I was in the army in 1952.

Carol-Anne: How old were you when you joined the army?
Benny: Eighteen.

Carol-Anne: Did you have to join?
Benny: I had no option. Everyone had to go...well, some people managed to get an exemption.

Carol-Anne: What army was it?
Benny: The Cameron Highlanders.

Carol-Anne: Were you in the pipe band?
Benny: I was yes...I knew Donald MacLeod before I went to Fort George and you go into Fort George and you do your training. You’re supposed to do sixteen weeks training but I got a call after ten weeks to go and see Pipe Major Donald MacLeod and he said ‘Would you like to go into the band?’ and I said ‘Yes I would’ because I was fed up of training and that was it, I went into the band. Into the pipe band and we just had a reunion two weeks ago down there in Dingwall. The pipers from 1949 – 52 and would you believe we had eight pipers and one drummer at the reunion. Only Norman Johnston had the pipes...

Carol-Anne: Who taught you to play the pipes then?
Benny: See when I went to learn the pipes first of all, I had to walk way up the Coal Pit Road and...all the way up to Fascally to see Jock Pipe, that’s what his name was, well his nickname, he was actually John Sutherland...I never missed going up that road, I used to have to walk sometimes in the rain, sometimes in the snow and everything else. I did my practice and all the rest of it just to keep Jock happy because if you didn’t, some people are lucky because they get someone who is soft hearted but I didn’t. See if I went up there with a tune that wasn’t memorised, I’d get it say on Monday and go back the following Monday and I didn’t have that tune complete, boy oh boy I’d get run out of the house completely! ‘Away you go, you’re no use to me. Come back next week.’ That’s what would happen.

Carol-Anne: How did he teach you?
Were you taught to read music?
Benny: We were taught to read music but Jock was alright but there was a lot of things he didn’t know. Let me put it this way, he was talking to Willie Ross one time... and what he said to him was ‘the little I do know about pipes just helped me to know just the little I do know about pipes!’ So, he wasn’t very confident within himself...But he got a start and I won the Mod and somebody asked me to go up to Willie MacDonald in Lairg, so that’s where I went, Willie Gruids...and he took me back to the beginning which was a big come down! It was no problem really, Willie was a nice guy, a topper of a guy. I went up there every week... on the goods train and when the goods train got into Lairg I jumped out at the back ran down over the swing bridge over the Shin I went over that and down into Gruids. Then when we saw the smoke coming off the train at Culrain, we jumped in the car and he gave me a run to the end of the bridge and I ran over the bridge and I went onto the engine of the meal train. Boy oh boy it was ‘Wall o’ Death’ that was driving that, a manny from Helmsdale and no wonder they called him that name! The engine was going like the clappers oh just going like the hammers! I never paid a fare though put it that way, so no complaints.

Carol-Anne: He was a good player wasn’t he? And did he compose tunes?
Benny: Yes, yes he did...

Carol-Anne: Did Willie Gruids teach about reading music and that?
Benny: Yes he did. He was into everything.

Carol-Anne: Did he teach you by singing tunes?
Benny: Cainntearachd! Not really but I got quite a bit of that when I was in the 4th/5th Camerons with the Uist boys... All these guys were into cainntearachd they would sing it and you would know perfectly well what you had to do...I use it now when I’m teaching the bairns, it’s a colossal help. You tell them ‘This is the sound you want and the only way you’ll get it is by playing this movement correctly’ and that means that they will go and they will play it correct and they will listen. When they get the sound they know they are doing it right.

Carol-Anne: Were there many pipers in Strathy?
Benny: Just Jock the Post... your grandfather’s brother. Up in Forsinard Johnnie, he played the pipes and I remember playing at a dance in Forsinard one night and I went home on the early morning train and I left my pipes with Johnnie because the dance was still going! He sent them down on one train, I think it came in about six o’ clock at night cause I was playing at a dance in Brora. The dance started when the pub closed then when it opened again they all went back to it. People were fit in those days. Thirteen eightsome reels I played for that night!

“I went up there every week... on the goods train and when the goods train got into Lairg I jumped out at the back, ran down over the swing bridge over the Shin... and down into Gruids”
Fèis Air An Oir

Agallamh còmhla ri Ealasaid NicAoidh
Interview with Elizabeth Mackay

Murdo: Can you tell me about where you were born and brought up?
Elizabeth: I was born in Glasgow but I was brought up in Portskerra.

Liam: Where abouts did you go to school?
Elizabeth: I went to school in Portskerra and then to Thurso.

Liam: Did any of your family speak Gaelic?
Elizabeth: Yes my father did but my mother didn’t. Her father spoke Gaelic but her mother didn’t, she came from the Borders. That’s one thing that I really regret is that I was never taught the Gaelic.

Tara: So there wouldn’t have been much Gaelic spoken at home then?
Elizabeth: No, if there were neighbours coming in they would speak Gaelic but not between my father and mother. Most of the villagers spoke Gaelic but it seemed to die out with my generation.

Liam: Was there music in your house when you grew up?
Elizabeth: My grandfather was a piper but no not really, my father didn’t play anything. My aunt played the violin but I can’t remember her doing it.

Tara: Did people come over to the house at all and play and sing when they came?
Elizabeth: They sang but I don’t remember people playing so much then.

Tara: Was that in Gaelic or in English?
Elizabeth: Both. It would be mostly at New Year time that we would have cèilidhs then. You had visitors every night, you had different neighbours coming in every night but it was mostly at New Year they had the cèilidhs.

Liam: Were there a lot of bands that came to play locally?
Elizabeth: Yes there was. There was the Kinbrace Dance Band and ones from Thurso side and Wick. I can’t remember now their names! Dances were a common thing in the village hall.

Murdo: Can you tell us any information about local cèilidhs when you were young?
Elizabeth: Well the cèilidhs used to be in the village hall when we were young and Calum Kennedy was one of the concert parties that used to come round. I can remember going to Thurso with our family to Calum Kennedy’s concert. Himself and his wife were there and his daughters were there but at the cèilidhs it was mostly just local artists.

“… he would cycle all the way to Scrabster with his accordion on his bike…”

Ealasaid NicAoidh
Elizabeth Mackay
Liam: Can you tell us about any local characters?
Elizabeth: Well, there was one chap who lived next door to us and he was a great accordionist and a good singer. He had a bike and he would go cycling all over, well his only transport was his bike. And he used to go to Scrabster to the Fisherman’s Mission and he would cycle all the way to Scrabster with his accordion on his bike and cycle back! He would entertain them on the boats at the Mission. He knew all the boats that passed and all the airplanes during the war.

Murdo: Were any of your family in the army?
Elizabeth: Yes, my father was in the First World War and my son was in the forces for five years. The First World War was never really spoken about, it seemed as though it was something in the past and that was it.

Murdo: Do you have any fishing tales from the area?
Elizabeth: Not really, well apart from the disasters. My great great grandfather was drowned in the first disaster in Portskerra and my granduncle in the second disaster.

Liam: Was religion a big part of village life?
Elizabeth: Oh yes. It was a big part of village life. The people from Portskerra and Melvich would walk over to the churches in Strathy. I can remember my father had one of the few lorries that was going in the village when I was young and he sometimes took the people to church in the back of the lorry on benches in the back and they would go up on the ladder into the lorry and he took them to church! There was no buses or cars going then...I can remember going to church with my father, to the church that your [Murdo] great granny and grandfather bought. I can remember going to that church and at first they had the Gaelic service which lasted an hour and then I had to sit through the English service which lasted another hour... I had to go because my father went to the Gaelic service.

Murdo: What are the main differences from when you were young to now with regard to Gaelic in the area?
Elizabeth: Well, the like of today the children have a lot more opportunities than when we were young, with music, and they now have Gaelic schools which I think is very good. The younger they start the children the easier it is for them to pick it up.

“Well, the like of today the children have a lot more opportunities than when we were young, with music, and they now have Gaelic schools which I think is very good.”
“It’s really good that Gaelic is now being spoken and Gaelic songs and there’s more music now…”

Agallamh còmhla ri Peigi Hambleton
Interview with Peggy Hambleton

Liam: Can you tell me about where you were born and brought up?
Peggy: I was born and brought up in Strathy West.

Liam: Where did you go to school?
Peggy: Strathy school. We would walk to school all year round, it was about a mile. There were no cars then.

Liam: Did your family speak any Gaelic?
Peggy: My father spoke Gaelic but my mother didn’t.

Liam: Can you speak any Gaelic?
Peggy: No.

Murdo: Were there bands that came to play from around about the area?
Peggy: Yes, they came from Forss when I was growing up, but that was later. I can’t remember anybody else.

Murdo: Do you remember any of the names of the people in the bands that came to play?
Peggy: There was Don Miller from Forss, that was latterly though. I can’t remember the earlier ones, we wouldn’t be going to dances then.

Liam: Was religion a big part of your village life?
Peggy: Oh yes. We went to Sunday school every Sunday and then we walked to the church about a mile away. The Gaelic was at twelve and English at one and we didn’t do any work on a Sunday. We got the water, we had to carry the peats in as well and there was no electricity…we weren’t allowed to sing or go out playing on a Sunday, we could go for a walk.

There was once, we went out for a walk to gather heather with our next door neighbour and he took us out on Loch Baligill and we weren’t supposed to be there on a Sunday but we didn’t tell. We used to go looking for birds’ nests, grouse at that, in the heather.

Liam: What differences can you see from when you were young to now with regard to music and Gaelic in the area?
Peggy: It’s getting much more prolific Gaelic and you know, ceilidhs and that. It’s really good that Gaelic is now being spoken and Gaelic songs and there’s more music now. My father used to play the Jews harp, they call it and he’d pick out a tune on the fiddle as well in his day. It’s great now in schools they are teaching music.
Suzie: I was born in Reading in Berkshire and I came home to Strathy when I was six weeks old and I was brought up in Strathy.

Claire: Is that in the house you are in now?
Suzie: Yes but it was just a thatched house then with three rooms, a living room, a best room and a closet which was a little bedroom. Then in 1932 the house was renovated and became a two storey house. There were one or two houses in the area done at the same time, like Davie Munro’s in Strathy East and the one Betty lives in now.

Claire: Do you remember them thatching?
Suzie: Not really, my father did the thatching but I remember going with Jimmy Dubh from Strathy East with his horse and cart to collect rashies to thatch the byre and barn. My father cut the rashies and Jimmy went up with his horse and cart and I went up to fork the sheaves of rashies on to the cart for him and they covered it with wire netting to keep the thatch in place from the wind.

Carol-Anne: How often did they replace it?
Suzie: Not every year but when it was necessary, when the wind started catching it and breaking it up. They cut it when it was green you see and put it on one rue and overlapped it – they had a way of thatching.

Claire: Where did you go to school?
Suzie: I went to Strathy school until I was eleven and then I went to Helmsdale school.

Natasha: How did you get to Helmsdale school?
Suzie: Well we went and lodged in Helmsdale with different people and we only got home at the holidays at Easter and Christmas and the summer holidays. We didn’t get home at weekends. You stayed with the landlady, sometimes there were two or three others. I stayed with a Mrs Macpherson first of all up in Navidale and Effie my old neighbours landlady stayed there too, and when Mrs Macpherson stopped taking pupils I stayed with a Mrs Fraser in Strath Naver Street and she had two boys from Melness and a boy from Bettyhill. Neil O’Brien from Bettyhill and Charlie Hugh Mackay and Donald Mackay from Melness and that was at the beginning of the war.

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Natasha: What were the lodgings like?
Suzie: They were very nice but I remember we always had cornflakes for breakfast and we had very watered down Carnation milk so it doesn’t do anything for me anymore!

Natasha: Do you come from a large family?
Suzie: Just my sister and I – just the two of us.

Claire: Did you speak any Gaelic?
Suzie: My father and grandmother did but not to us, just between them when my grandmother was alive. There was a lot spoken in the community.

Carol-Anne: Where did your grandmother come from?
Suzie: From Baligill. My mother was English and never spoke Gaelic.

Natasha: What were the lodgings like?
Suzie: They were very nice but I remember we always had cornflakes for breakfast and we had very watered down Carnation milk so it doesn’t do anything for me anymore!

Natasha: Do you remember any local bands in the area?
Suzie: I remember bands coming from Caithness to play at dances. My father played the bagpipes and sometimes he played in the hall and sometimes we’d be walking home at four in the morning and we’d be like the Pied Piper following him and dancing on the road. But that was before the war when I was young.

Carol-Anne: Did he play in the house?
Suzie: Yes at New Year and there’d be céilidhs when people came round at New Year and they saved up for their bottle of whiskey and just one bottle. Everyone had to have a drink when they came to your house – the same glass was passed round everybody...And the women just took a sip of it to say Happy New Year. Then they’d go to the neighbours but the bottle seemed to do them all – they just took a sip! They had a bottle of port for the ladies – not sherry.

Natasha: What songs did you sing?
Suzie: Annie Lawrie, Loch Lomond – Scottish songs – I’m not going to sing! [laughter]

Claire: Any fishing tales?
Suzie: No but my grandfather went to sea when my father was young but he was dead before I was born. They lived in Strathy Point. My father fell overboard and came up for the third time before he was taken out of the sea. He used to go fishing for cuddies and they shared them with other folk who didn’t have any. Generations back my folk were cooperers – made barrels for the herring – they were called Cooper to distinguish between all the Mackays.

Carol-Anne: Where did the céilidhs and dances held?
Suzie: Well the céilidhs sometimes in houses after cutting peats – they would help one another cutting the peats and they’d have a meal after. The women went up to the peat banks with a dinner, with a pot of soup and stuff for the men and when they had that to eat they’d help them with the peats – throwing out the peats on the bank or spreading them. The women did that, then they’d come and make dinner for night time and have céilidhs among themselves after that. I don’t remember going to céilidhs when I was young but we always had a church social in the spring time and Christmas we had a sort of a concert and we performed a play or did singing and we always had tea or that.

Carol-Anne: What songs did you sing?
Suzie: Annie Lawrie, Loch Lomond – Scottish songs – I’m not going to sing! [laughter]
Carol-Anne: So it was separate from the church?
Suzie: Yes – then we walked there and went to the church – the Telford church - and walked home after. My father was the bell ringer. We always said grace before and after our meals and in the morning time we had the “Books” as they said and read a passage out of the Bible and prayed. That was a thing of village life.

Natasha: Has it changed much over the years?
Suzie: Vastly – nothing really similar at all today I’m afraid – everything’s changed.

Claire: Do you remember house weddings?
Suzie: I only ever went to one house wedding and it was in Shebster in Caithness. It was in the house and the reception was in the barn and everything was home cooked – the meat, chicken, soup and everything. It was a terrible stormy night but that was how it was done. It was a girl Ross from Dalangwell who got married to Harold Weale from Strathy Point. Relations of Ross the painters from Thurso... The grandfather used to come down – he had a horse and he used to come down on a Saturday and go to the pub and maybe shopping as well at the local shop. He would be going home at night in the dark on horseback across the river to the house and I always remember hearing him singing going up the road – he’d be singing “Dark Lochnagar” in the dark and the horse took him home over the river and he didn’t have a torch or anything! Rhina used to come down to the shop on a Friday night. She had a “gig” with her and she’d say come and have a ride in the gig with her and she’d give me the reins to lead the horse – I thought I was the cat’s whiskers!

Natasha: Were there Highland Games locally?
Suzie: Not that I can think of – the only time I remember anything was at the Coronation when they had games down by the river in Strathy and had tea in the hall – the old hall. We played Tug o’ War, racing and the usual games. There was a lot of people there, and dancing after with someone playing the accordion and pipes. The young ones used to play football away up the side of the river on a flat bit there and they played badminton twice a week in the old hall – the hall that got blown away in the storm. We used to go and watch them but the older ones didn’t let the young ones play. Jean MacBeth’s father opened the hall and put the stove on and lit the Tilley lamps and before the others would come we’d have a little game but they never encouraged the young ones to play. Quite a lot played – they used to have a kettle and made a cup of tea but the stove would be red hot with peat burning. The roof was low and there was a hole in the ceiling and the shuttle cocks went up there and we never got them.

Carol-Anne: What difference is there between when you were young and now with regard to music and Gaelic?
Suzie: When I was young there was a lot of young people – the local school was open and now there’s only one little boy on this side of the river and he goes to school in Thurso. Every household had two or three young ones going to school. There was big families and so a lot of pupils. It’s completely different now and our school is closed. There’s no peat cutting, no hay making. My father would be cutting the hay with the scythe and we’d be turning and raking it and putting it in coles and if the weather was bad we’d have to take them out of other again and make them bigger. Then it was carted in with the horse and cart to the stack yard and made into a screw – someone forking and someone making the screw. It was a lot of work but there was no TV or radio to entertain and you’d have a ceilidh after that. Nothing is the same now, it’s all changed and the hay is baled or made into silage...Nearly everybody had a cow and a few hens. If your cow was dry your neighbour gave you milk and vice versa. You put a setting of eggs under a clucking hen to get chickens – you’d get eggs from your neighbour so you’d not use the same ones and then you helped your neighbours like that. But there wasn’t the work, people had to go away to work and always get home and if they were in Caithness they might cycle home at the weekend. There was nothing modern – you’d have to take the washboard and scrub the clothes on it!

“I only ever went to one house wedding and it was in Shebster in Caithness. It was in the house and the reception was in the barn and everything was home cooked.”
Ellie: Where were you born and brought up?
Janette: I was born in Strathy in 1944 and brought up in Strathy. I went to primary school in Strathy and secondary school in Dornoch because there were no secondary schools here on the North Coast at that time and so I went to Dornoch.

Ellie: How did you get there?
Janette: We had to stay in a hostel in Dornoch. We were taken by bus at the beginning of term and we lived in the hostel and we were there all the time and we never got home at weekends, we stayed there till the holidays at the end of term and we got home by bus again.

Ellie: Did you enjoy being there?
Janette: I was very homesick when I went there and I used to cry every night and in fact when I got a letter from my mother, cause there was no phone calls then, when I saw the letter with my mother’s handwriting I used to cry and I could hardly read the letters for the tears cause I was so homesick – to begin with. But then you get used to it like you get used to everything else and it wasn’t quite so bad.

Ellie: Did you come from a big family?
Janette: Yes indeed I did, there were six of us at home. I had three brothers and two sisters.

Ellie: Did they also go to school in Dornoch?
Janette: No. I had an older sister and brother who went to Thurso. But then Thurso school was getting overcrowded and they wouldn’t allow Sutherland children go into Caithness we had to go to a school in Sutherland and there was no senior secondary school anywhere near. It either had to be Golspie or Dornoch and I went to Dornoch because there was a hostel there that I could live in.

Ellie: Did your family speak Gaelic?
Janette: Yes my mother and father were fluent speakers it was their first language but they were made to speak English when they went to school.

Ellie: Was there music in your house when you were young?
Janette: Yes lots of music – bagpipes, and accordion and singing.

Ellie: Did you play any instruments?
Janette: I tried the accordion a wee bit when I was very young and then I did the fiddle for a wee while in secondary school but I wasn’t very good at them. We used to play the paper and the comb and had great fun with that. We didn’t have the same opportunity as you have today. There wasn’t a Fèis or lessons at school in them days.

“Within the past ten years there’s been a resurgence of music on the North Coast.”

Seònaid NicAoidh
Janette Mackay
Ellie: Did your parents have an influence on you learning Gaelic?
Janette: Yes and it’s the very opposite of what it is today because when my mother and father went to school if they were heard talking Gaelic they were belted. They had to speak English because Gaelic would hold them back and so they did not teach us Gaelic and that is really how our language almost died out around here. But today we are encouraged to learn Gaelic and we have a Gaelic school and a Gaelic teacher in secondary school and so all looks much brighter for the Gaelic language in the future.

Ellie: Did your family play any musical instruments?
Janette: My father played the chanter and the bagpipes but mainly the chanter. My cousins, uncle and neighbour all played the pipes and we had many nights of bagpipe music in our house. And we did lots of singing – mainly Gaelic singing. Within the past ten years there's a resurgence of music on the North Coast. You know this is one of the main reasons why we started the Féis. As you know I have been involved in organising concerts and ceilidhs along the North Coast for many years and it came to my notice that there wasn't so many people playing instruments and it was a very lean time about ten years ago and I realised we had to do something to get all the music and that back again. Since we started the Féis there’s been a real difference – lots of young people are playing.

Ellie: Do you think music back then was better than music now?
Janette: No I don’t think so – today is great and there’s more variety now and there’s more instruments. Back then it was mainly bagpipes, boxie or fiddle. Now we have the guitar, mandolin and keyboards and it’s good.

“I realised we had to do something to get all the music and that back again. Since we started the Féis there’s been a real difference – lots of young people are playing.”
Carol-Anne: Where were you born and brought up?
Robin: I was born in Dunbar Hospital, Thurso on 17th June 1942. My father worked in Dounreay at the time at the old Admiralty Aerodrome (for use at wartime). We lived in the Old Mill in Reay and then in Cavendish Cottage, Reay (that’s the house beside the school) until I was eleven. Then we moved to Bettyhill and I went to school there for a while and then I went to Thurso for secondary school. After a year I came back to Bettyhill school and stayed until I was fifteen. Then I became an apprentice at Dounreay and served my time as a fitter/turner. After a year’s training we had to go along with our parents to go and sign our ‘deeds of apprenticeship’. The man who drove us there, myself, my mother and my cousin Irene (my father had died before this) dropped us off and unknown to us went away and had a few drams. When we came out there was no sign of him but eventually he turned up and we got into his car but when we were driving up the runway the police came after us and stopped us and he was taken away. So we had to walk up to the end of the road to a house there and the man ran us home. Quite an eventful day – one to remember! But we got the deeds signed anyway. Then of course we had to go to the court in Wick. That was an experience meeting the Sheriff.

Carol-Anne: How did you get to school?
Robin: No bother – in Reay I just jumped over the wall and in Bettyhill I went down through the field. From Thurso we caught John George’s bus at the post office on a Monday morning and stayed all week in lodgings in Thurso.

Carol-Anne: Did you like that?
Robin: No. There was myself and Alistair Fraser in lodgings with a Mrs Bain in Royal Terrace and we got home on a Friday night.

Carol-Anne: What did you do in the evenings?
Robin: Oh, we went to the swing park or something like that or to the chip shop – Donald Hugh was there too – or we went for walks.

Carol-Anne: So how old were you then?
Robin: Thirteen years old.

Carol-Anne: So that was the big town?
Robin: Yes that was the big town that I didn’t like.

Carol-Anne: So did you come from a big family?
Robin: Well I had an older brother and Wilma my cousin was brought up along with us because her mother died when she was a baby. My mother had two sisters, Aggie the older lived in Rogart and she had a big family. One of her daughters, Irene lives in Bettyhill. Her other sister Hughina died young and her brother Harry who was a well known character in this area lived in Armadale. He was a fisherman and was in charge of the salmon fishing there. He was a Merchant Navy man and was involved with the Russian convoys. My childhood was spent in Reay till I was eleven.

Carol-Anne: What about your dad?
Robin: He was born in Sandside in 1888 and had four sisters and two brothers. His father was a shepherd and some of the places they lived were Craggie, Forsinain, Loyal and Loch Strathy. They walked from Loch Strathy – thirteen miles – down to the cross roads at Strathy to catch the horse
Carol-Anne: Where did they come from?

Carol-Anne: What were they doing there?
Robin: Well I don’t know. My granny on my father’s side lived there in Leith. They must have moved back once my grandfather died – he was from Strath Naver – from Grumore – you can see the ruins of the houses up there. His people were cleared to Invernaver, just beside the cattle grid. One of my father’s sisters, my aunt, was a Lady’s maid and travelled all over the world.

Carol-Anne: Is she the one who brought all the fancy stuff back from New York?
Robin: Yes that’s right. My father died in 1958 at the age of seventy, I was only fifteen.

Carol-Anne: Did any of your family speak Gaelic?
Robin: Yes, both my mother and father spoke Gaelic but not to me. They spoke it when they didn’t want me to know what they were saying.

Carol-Anne: Were there a lot of Gaelic speakers?
Robin: Yes, up west but not in Reay.

Carol-Anne: What about music, was there music in your house?
Robin: Not much. There was a button key boxie I used to have a go on and when people came in we made a noise with it. My Aunt Ina must have had it.

Carol-Anne: Do you have any stories about cèilidhs?
Robin: We used to go to Armadale and the folks gathered in houses telling stories and that. There’d be concerts in the hall with local people singing – Mina Mackay. She was from Skye and sang Gaelic songs and Sheila Carney in Bettyhill was a good singer. And Fred Leslie from Bettyhill would be singing “The Road and the Miles to Dundee” and Neil Alexander from Farr also sang.

Carol-Anne: What about musical instruments?
Robin: Donnie MacLeod from Strath Naver (from Assynt) played the fiddle, Joseph Mackay Melness sang and played the fiddle and his wife Bally played the piano along with him. And Tot Burr from Tongue sang too.

Carol-Anne: Were there any others?
Robin: Yes, there was Duncan Naver, Maurice’s brother, he was a good fiddler, and Hughie Mackay (New Houses as he was known) played the boxie and Jackie Craig. There was a Bettyhill band at that time and they were all in it. And there was Teedie Mackay (Crow), he played the accordion in it and Alex John played the mouth organ.

Carol-Anne: Would there be dancing?
Robin: Magnus Mackay (Bain) he was a good singer too and sang at concerts.

Carol-Anne: Was there a fear an taighe?
Robin: Yes, Davie Clachan was good at that.

Carol-Anne: How often did they have concerts?
Robin: Now and again – once or twice a year. We went to Strath Naver and Armadale as well – it was the same people.

Carol-Anne: Were the bands coming from out with your area?
Robin: Yes, we had the Wick Scottish Dance Band led by Addie Harper (Senior) and Ian Nicolson and Noel Donaldson, a very good band. And of course Mackay’s Dance Band from Watten was very popular. There was also The Milton Trio from Caithness and the Caberfeidh Band from Rogart. More recently we had the Tongue Ceilidh Band led by John Barlow, Joseph Mackay, Tommy Mackay, Johnnie Campbell the blacksmith and Donald Maclean. Unfortunately some of these folk are no longer with us.

Carol-Anne: The dances would be in the halls?
Robin: Yes, there were three halls built after the big storm blew the old ones away. They were built in Skerray, Bettyhill and Strathly. I remember the small holes on the wall behind the platform for the projector, used by the film guild to show the pictures once a month.

Carol-Anne: Do you know any local songs?
Robin: Naver Bay, Waters of Kylesku, Ben Hope and Gleann Gollaidh was a favourite Gaelic song in this area.

Carol-Anne: Were there any interesting characters?
Robin: Yes, Donnie Kye – he visited houses regularly and had lots of stories and songs – especially if he had a dram! But he was a very hard worker, one of the old style crofters who’d sown corn by hand, cut hay with the scythe, planted tatties, cut peats, had cows and for some years had a horse too. A great character. In Farr there was Frankie MacNeil. He used to sing all the way home from the pub at night – no lights on his bike. I remember hearing a story about him helping Hughie in Newlands with some work. He was seen pulling a rope along the ground and when questioned about why he was pulling the rope his reply was “You try pushing it!!”

Carol-Anne: Were any of your family in the army?
Robin: Yes my brother Bill did National Service. He was in Malaya in the jungle. My Aunt Hughina was a fitter in the RAF. She died in 1948.

Carol-Anne: Were any of them fishermen?
Robin: Yes my Uncle Harry was in charge of the salmon fishing at Armadale. They also fished lobsters and crabs there. He also used to go to Yarmouth to work on the trawlers. I remember him bringing back a tin of crisps to us!
Srath Heiladail, Srath Nabhair agus Sgìre na Luirg

Agallamhan còmhlach ri:
Sandra agus Raymond Train
Irene Ross
Mairead NicAoidh
Edith Reid

Strath Halladale, Strath Naver and Lairg Area

Interviews with:
Sandra and Raymond Train, Irene Ross, Margaret Mackay, Edith Reid
“I was born and brought up in Strath Halladale in a place called Dalhalvaig which means ‘meadow of wood sorrow’ [in Gaelic].”

Agallamh còmhla ri Sandra agus Raymond Train
Interview with Sandra and Raymond Train

Natasha: Can you tell us a little bit about where you were born and brought up?
Sandra: I was born and brought up in Strath Halladale in a place called Dalhalvaig which means ‘meadow of wood sorrow’ [in Gaelic].
Raymond: I was born in Stonehaven in Kincardineshire at a lighthouse.

Liam: Where did you go to school and how did you get there?
Sandra: Well, I walked to school because it was just down the road – the primary school was at Dalhalvaig which is now closed. At eleven, I went to Golspie and I got there by bus at the beginning of term and coming home at the end of the term. There were no opportunities to come home during the term and I did that for six years.

Natasha: So did you just come home at Christmas and Easter?
Sandra: At Christmas and Easter and the summer and that was how it was.

Liam: And did your parents write letters?
Sandra: They wrote letters or sent us parcels and goodies and money – Red Cross food parcels! We were quite often hungry – we were in lodgings in digs, there was no hostel – I’m talking about over fifty years ago.

Murdo: Do you come from a big family?
Sandra: I’ve only one sister but I have thirty seven first cousins so you could say that I come from a very big family. My mother was of a family of nine and my father of a family of six and I love genealogy and so I have first cousins that I know, second cousins that I know and third cousins and they are all over the world, even in Patagonia in South America.

Natasha: Did any of your family speak Gaelic?
Sandra: Oh yes, yes, we spoke Gaelic in the house. The home that I was brought up in was my father’s parents home and although my Grandmother MacDonald was a MacDonald from Caithness she was from a Gaelic speaking family from the Latheron area and my grandfather was brought up at Halladale and he was Gaelic speaking. My mother’s mother was a very good Gaelic scholar, she was a Fraser also from Halladale. So Gaelic was spoken in the home. When I went to Golspie I had an interest in Gaelic and I retained it throughout my life and that’s how I have Gaelic today.

Natasha: Was there much Gaelic out with your home and family?
Sandra: No, not really in Golspie at all, although there were some families who spoke Gaelic but we didn’t speak Gaelic there, but I spoke it after I went to university and met people from the Western Isles and Skye and so on. There was obviously an interest there so in the last number of years we’ve been going to Sabhal Mòr Ostaig and become more adept at it. I can read and write it quite well.
Liam: Was there music in your home?
Sandra: Yes, a lot of music in my home. My Grandfather MacDonald was a good singer and my father sang. My mother didn’t sing but she danced and she taught us how to dance, just dancing between one door and the other – the door into the kitchen and the door out the other end! When the music was being played and people would come in and sit round, there was no TV, the radio crackled, there was nothing much on radio. There was no Gaelic on the radio, no Gaelic programmes so you made your own entertainment and old mannies would come in to see my grandfather and he would have riddles. “Round and round the ragged rock the ragged rascal ran. How many r’s are in that tell me if you can?”
Liam: None!
Sandra: Exactly – and things like that and then somebody would have the fiddle or Jews harp, the trump, and we’d be all told to sing a song and you had to sing it word perfect. The men might get a dram and ladies a cup of tea and that would be it that was your cèilidh – it was a visit – not a concert.

Murdo: Can you tell us anything about local ceilidhs in the Strath?
Sandra: On a more formal setting in the hall some of the well known Gaelic singers of the time like Kenny MacRae and Margaret Duncan, they would be invited to come and the hall would be absolutely packed and there would be a dance afterwards. Local people would sing like Johnnie Mackay Trantlebeg who was the piper and we as children would be encouraged to get up and sing and then more recently our generation would be doing the same thing as our fathers and mothers had done and so on. The bands that came were the Kinbrace Band, John George Sutherland, Di Sutherland, the Garvault Men, Joe MacKenzie, the Achnavast Band, Johnnie and Peter MacDonald – they were pipers but they also had a band. And then local men would have their fiddle and Johnnie Mackay the piper. The big event of the year when we were children and teenagers was Christmas Tree night – it was for the children and by the children and we spent a long time preparing for that. So we put on the concert and we got adults to help us as well to fill the programme and there was a dance afterwards – always a dance.

Liam: How did the bands get to Halladale?
Sandra: By a miracle! They came quite miraculously by motorcycles with sidecars and in old trucks and vans and that’s how we went to dances – just piled into a car and hoped that it stayed on the road until it got to where you were going. And that it stayed on the road when you came home!

Natasha: Do you remember any ghost stories?
Sandra: Oh yes, there were quite a lot about the second sight, people seeing things that were going to happen and seeing lights and things like that. Cars that were supposed to come on but never appeared...My grandfather was on the Highland Railway and they were staying in Strathpeffer and my grandmother used to help one of the other wives to keep the waiting rooms nice because Strathpeffer was a spa town and very wealthy people came to Strathpeffer to the hotels. So it was nice when they came off the train, the ladies would go and powder their nose or whatever and wait for their carriage to take them to the hotel. One day my grandmother and Mrs Manson who was from Caithness, were tiding up and my grandmother was astonished to see Mrs Manson standing back as though to let something past. And she said “What’s the matter?” “Are you not seeing what I’m seeing?” “No” she said “I’m not seeing anything, we are just here alone.” And she said “but a train has just come in and there’s a funeral coming off the train. Can you not see the people? Can you not see the men?” And my grandmother said “I can’t see anything.” So my grandmother was a bit disturbed and Mrs Manson said “Oh it’s alright, I sometimes see things. Don’t worry about it.” A few days later a train did come in, and the funeral did come off the train and it was exactly as Mrs Manson had described it. But that is very much in the Highland psyche and some people see things and some people don’t and I had an experience myself.

“Oh yes, there were quite a lot about the second sight, people seeing things that were going to happen and seeing lights and things like that.”
In Strath Halladale there’s the old Free Church beside the mill, that’s where Raymond and I were married. One Easter in 1972 we went for a walk up the burn, that’s the burn that runs up past the mill, and on the way back I said to Raymond without any thought “I would like to go and have a look round the church.” Now normally, I would just look in the front of the church but for some reason, best known to me I went round the back and there’s a little ledge with stones and I stood on the ledge and I looked in, and the church was full of people and they were all in black. I just closed my eyes and I came away. I said nothing to Raymond but a day or two later I told my father and he said “I don’t know, I don’t know about that. I don’t like it.” Now, my father had one sister, he had five brothers and I was very close to her. I used to teach French and Latin and she taught Latin and we visited her often. She was in Edinburgh. The next time we were together as a family was at her funeral because she was killed in a car accident. I can only connect the two things. I can’t say that there is a connection but I connect them. If it is anything, it is as Raymond says auto-selection, a folk memory, because I used to go regularly to that church as a child with my grandparents, with my Granny Fraser at Communion time and people would be all dressed in black. It’s a bit sombre isn’t it!

Natasha: No but it’s interesting that you say that because it is connected mainly to Highland people.

Sandra: Oh yes, it seems to be a Highland thing the second sight. It’s not wished for.

Liam: No, people just have it.

Sandra: It’s there or it’s not there.

Natasha: Do you have any stories about Gaelic in your area and it being spoken a lot within the community and not just in the home?

Sandra: A very old story from Halladale was a man from Northumberland, his name was Robert Hall and I don’t know how he came to Strath Halladale but we are talking nineteenth century. He worked with everybody, he did odd jobs and he learned Gaelic because Gaelic was spoken he had to learn Gaelic but some people didn’t recognise that he had Gaelic. There were two gossips in Halladale, they were ladies of course! Robert Hall went with them one day to help them lift their peats. So all the way out they were gossiping, tearing other people to bits, destroying other peoples characters. So, he was a bit sick of this, so he said to himself “They are doing all this because they think I have no Gaelic.” So he was in the bank, have you been in a peat bank?

Liam: Yeah.

Sandra: Throwing them out! And he kept them going so that they hadn’t breath to gossip. They were shattered! Exhausted. And on the way home he said to them in Gaelic “Well you didn’t say much later today that Rob Hall didn’t understand!” They knew then that he understood everything they had said in the morning!

Liam: Do you know any local songs or tunes that you could sing or play?

Sandra: Well there’s;

_O Ben Hope you’re soaring high,
You’re almost reaching to the sky,
A bonnier sight I ne’er did see._

_Than where Kinloch River joins the sea_

Sandra: This is a parody that I’ve made on “Bonnie Naver Bay”. I asked if I could get permission to put other words to the same tune so it’s about Strath Halladale.

Where the Halladale joins the sea
There’s a place I long to be
Where the crofters tend their sheep and make their hay
_Sitting by our fireside bright_
_In our home on cìrdìdh night_
_In a place not far from bonnie Melvich Bay_

You can go to Forsinard
Though the road be long and hard
Or to Sycr or Altaharra further west
_But show to me the path that will lead me
to the Strath_
_To the only place I really love the best_

_There’s Kildonan and Kinbrace_
_And many ’s a bonnie place_
_With treasures and traditions of their own_

But my feet will often stray to go down Dalhalvaig way
To the only place I ever could call home

So if ever you come north
Just come to my place of birth
Forget about the Callins or Ben Eighe
Build your castles in the sand in my home in Sutherland
In a place not far from bonnie Melvich Bay

Liam: Can you tell us about any local musicians that were in the area when you were younger?

Sandra: Well the most famous one was Johnnie Mackay Trantlebeg and he died twenty years ago. He composed lots and lots of pipe tunes; “The Green Fields of Halladale”, “The Weasel in the Dyke” and there’s one called “Sandra Train of Edinburgh.” There’s a book of his music. There were others too, there were fiddlers but Johnnie was the outstanding one. He was of a family of pipers and a family of fiddlers. The sad thing was, during the First World War when the boys were all away in the trenches, some of whom did not come back, his father said “I can’t bear to hear the fiddle or the pipes being played, because the boys are not here to do it.” But when they came home they played, and they used to play outside and my mother who lived next door to them said they used to march up and down the road, whirled round and marched back. It was wonderful!

_“O Ben Hope you’re soaring high,
You’re almost reaching to the sky,
A bonnier sight I ne’er did see,
Than where Kinloch River joins the sea”_
Raymond: A story about Johnnie Mackay, he did some tutoring, he taught people the pipes and this is quite well known. One day, in Edinburgh quite a few years ago I was lecturing to students in the university of Edinburgh and I was saying something about agriculture and the farming industry and I said “I know a place in the north of Scotland” and I explained some details about the form of agriculture, crofting and so forth and I must have given some detail away which this girl picked up... I had that, you know, it’s one thing to be very efficient but I know someone who does some crofting up north and he’s a piper. You can sometimes see him laying beside a haystack while his animals wander into neighbouring fields and he’ll be playing the chanter and composing a tune! His animals would be wandering away but he was much more interested in the piping! Anyway, the students filed out but one girl stayed behind and she said “You’re not by any chance talking about Sutherland?” “I could be” I said. “It’s not Strath Halladale by any chance?” And I said “Well it could just be!” And she said then “That wasn’t Johnnie Mackay you were talking about was it?!” Johnnie Mackay taught my father the pipes!” He was very well known.

Sandra: The old men went round cèilidhing at night on their own. Quite often they would come to two or three houses and gather news as they went and then they would go home after that. They would just stop in, find out the news and tell the news on their way round. You see there were no telephones. They would go to the post office to whom and who was doing this and the news of the day and who did what they would come to two or three cèilidhing at night on their own. Quite often they would come to two or three households because quite often they would come to two or three salmon. Now, that was spoken to in this way, so he retreated but he didn’t retreat very far and when they caught the salmon they were after they hid them in the bush and went off home obviously to come back later and get the salmon. So our young friend was seen some time later by his mum and dad coming up from the river with a big bulky object under his jacket and with a tail flashing and this was the salmon that his uncle caught! So he had the last laugh.

Natasha: Now, was religion a big part of your community?
Sandra: Oh hugely in our community. It was the same in every Highland community I think at that time. There was a strong religious belief, the church was much more powerful if you like than it is today... First thing in the morning you had family worship, you ‘took The Books’, that’s what it was called ‘taking The Books’. The Books would be the Psalter and the Bible and your grandfather or your father took the Bible read a portion of the Scripture, sang a part of a psalm, and said the Lord’s Prayer and that was you ready for the day. And you did exactly the same in the evening and no matter who was in the house, twice a day. Even if friends or relations from abroad or anywhere, people passing by – my father would often take people in, you know hitchhikers or that and if The Books hadn’t been taken they would sit in and they must have wondered ‘What on earth is this?’ So that was done and grace was said before every meal and grace was said after every meal and Sunday was set aside, very little was done on a Sunday. We didn’t go so far as to not do the dishes, we all did the dishes and cooked and fed the animals and everything that had to be done was done but you didn’t put a washing out, you didn’t listen to the radio, we didn’t have television, you didn’t whistle or sing or play games or anything like that. You took a day off, it was a quiet day and as for going off to shop or do anything like that – absolutely not.
Liam: You just did what was necessary?
Sandra: Yes that was it. If there was a church ceremony you went to that, either the Free Church or the Church of Scotland and the Communions. I have brought something with me that you might like to see about the Communions. So that’s how we were brought up but I wouldn’t say, now it sounds like a strict regime doesn’t it?
Natasha: Very.

Sandra: It sounds as though you were restricted but looking back, you were safe. You were safe. Everybody knew you and that didn’t always suit us when we were out having fun and that and everybody knew who you were but you were safe within the community and we would go to dances and so on. I loved to dance and I still love to dance and I was home from university, I would be seventeen or eighteen...my first year home from university and I was walking down the Strath road thinking I was the bee’s knees, skirt out to here and the high heels and I was off to the dance when I met this gentleman on the road.

Now, it wasn’t the Communion weekend in Halladale but it was in Strathy. There wouldn’t be a dance in Halladale if it was Communion season. So, he must have been up visiting and he didn’t say hello to me, or good evening, he said “Where are you going?!” Now it was pretty obvious that I was going to a dance or something like that so I said “I’m going to the dance!” “You’ll dance your way to hell.” Now that was pretty grim and I got a real fright about that. I didn’t say a thing in reply as I was a bit shaken. Now I was talking to my father about it afterwards because he was a Free Church elder and I asked him “Do you think there will be dancing in Heaven?” “Yes” he said “of course there will.”

Raymond: There is no truth in the rumour that one of the other restrictive things that was done in Halladale was to put the cockerel under the creel so that he wouldn’t crow on a Sunday!

Liam: Do you remember any house weddings?
Sandra: Never a house wedding but Raymond and I had our feet washed before the night of our wedding. That’s very much a Halladale and North Sutherland thing. It’s called the night of the feet washing and it’s usually the night before the wedding but actually in our case it was two nights before the wedding because my mother didn’t want all that carry on because we had people staying with us. We got married on Halladale itself but the reception wasn’t in the house it was in Thurso afterwards. So I was pretty sure this was going to happen and I prepared myself for it. Now what happens is that first of all the young couples have to be in the bride’s house and as many young people, the bridesmaids, the best man and as many young ones as they can pack into the house are there too because they want the fun and the frolics. A tub is prepared with cold water and you don’t know a thing about it until it happens.

Raymond: The tub usually be the blanket tub.

Sandra: The one that you wash the blankets in with your feet because there were no washing machines. So this particular day Raymond and his best man and mother arrived and so on and there were uncles and aunts of mine and many of my thirty seven cousins and crowds of others round about and my sister and her fiancé and so on. An uncle of mine, now I could see nothing for it. Afterwards. So I was pretty sure this was going to happen and I prepared myself for it. Now what happens is that first of all the young couples have to be in the bride’s house and as many young people, the bridesmaids, the best man and as many young ones as they can pack into the house are there too because they want the fun and the frolics. A tub is prepared with cold water and you don’t know a thing about it until it happens. Raymond: The tub would usually be the blanket tub.

Sandra: That’s very much a Halladale and North Sutherland thing. It’s called the night of the feet washing and it’s usually the night before the wedding.

Raymond: Yes but Sandra’s mother and father were put to bed.
Sandra: Yes, that’s another thing that was done. The night of the wedding, all the girls grabbed the bride and got her ready for bed with lots of nonsense and carry on and they threw her in to the room and the men did the same with the new husband and threw him in as well and then left and went back to the dance!

Raymond: And supposedly your dad threw his pyjamas out of the window! Sandra: Yes, supposedly he did for mischief!

Murdo: Were there Highland Games locally?
Sandra: Yes there used to be games on Halladale, piping and racing and so on. They were discontinued after 1939 and reinstated in 1999 and now they’ve become defunct again. It was local initiative in 1999 and now there’s so few people that it’s not happening again. It’s rather sad.

“That’s very much a Halladale and North Sutherland thing. It’s called the night of the feet washing and it’s usually the night before the wedding”
Natasha: What differences can you see from when you were young with regard to music and Gaelic in the area?
Sandra: Well Gaelic is dead in Halladale. It just doesn’t exist but I would say that I’m the only person who speaks Gaelic on Halladale and I tell Raymond “Cha do chuir mi siùcar ann” “I haven’t put sugar in” and a few other expressions.
Raymond: We’ve both been to the Gaelic college in Skye.
Natasha: That’s on my to do list!
Sandra: Y es, you should do it, you’d enjoy it.

Natasha: Do you speak Gaelic in the house together?
Sandra: Y es, I speak it to friends on the phone and I email in Gaelic and I read Gaelic and listen to it on the radio. I try to immerse myself in Gaelic but we still use Gaelic sayings, people will say “mas fhior” “as if” or “supposedly” and we use that. And they’ll say ‘beannachd leibh’ or ‘oidhche mhath’ or ‘slàinte mhath’ – they’ll say things like that. They’ll say “mas fhior he’s going to church”, “supposedly he’s going to church.” But yes, the difference is enormous. Halladale has fewer local born Halladale people that it has incomers, now I’ve nothing against incomers but it dilutes the population. I mean, we are the oldies now and we just except that.

Liam: Do you have any other local poems or tales or sayings that we could use in our project?
Sandra: Well, something that we haven’t talked about is making whisky. There were whisky bothies on Halladale, you know the whisky shielings. The shielings were where the animals went to the summer pastures so they were quite legal but also hidden out there in different places were the whisky stills and the gaugers, the excise men would know that there were such things in all these areas. The story goes that the gaugers were coming up from Melvich. We say up the Strath from Melvich, you go up against the river and down with the river. So they gaugers were spotted coming up the Strath and the men had to have time to hide the equipment, the stills. They needed something to divert the gaugers, they were coming on horseback and they were coming at a good old tilt right. So there was a boy about the middle of the Strath, about Craigtown and he wasn’t a boy like you sadly, he didn’t have everything up here. He was told ‘You’ve got to stop these men, keep them here. Tell them whatever story you like but you’ve got to keep them as long as you possibly can.” Delaying tactics, that’s what it was all about. So, this lad thought to himself ‘What will I say to them? So he stopped them, and they stopped and he said ‘See that big rock there, it’s called Craigtown rock. I bet you can’t throw a rock over the top of it?’ ‘I can do it’ says he. So, ‘Och well’ they said and to humour them they began to do it. And then they got quite excited that some of them started to get it quite high and it became a bit of a competition with them. And he delayed them for a fair old while and when they got up the Strath, as far as Allt a’ Mhuilinn, Millburn and Dalhalvaig and Trantlemor and Trantlebeg there was not a thing to be found. Thanks to that lad, he was pretty tapaidh wasn’t he? He was as clever as can be.

Janette: Now, tell me about the coin again, where you found it?
Sandra: Now when we were children we were shown the coin and we were told by my grandfather that this is what my Uncle Colin was given as bad change at the Carlyle Fair when he was a drover...And the years went by and when myself and Raymond came back up to Halladale, we were retired, we started stripping everything and one particular day we stripped the floor in what they would call the kitchen and what we would call the sitting room...and there was the famous coin! Under as many layers of newspapers! And I said “That’s the coin we were shown!”... The date on it is 1833. Now Colin MacDonald the drover was born in 1838 and he died in 1917 and I would say that his droving days would have been in the 1850s and 1860s and even into the 1870s. But that is 1833...it is Louis Napoleon...and his head is on it. He had many stories and they went from the Strath. There were a lot of drovers went from Halladale.
Natasha: Now Irene can you tell me where you were born and brought up?
Irene: I was born in Dalchork near Lairg but I was brought up in Rogart.

Natasha: So where did you go to school?
Irene: I went to school in Rogart, Blairich school and we walked three miles to the school.

Natasha: Do you come from a big family?
Irene: A very big family, there were nine of us and we’re all still alive except one. He was drowned so there are eight of us left.

Natasha: Did most of your family speak Gaelic?
Irene: My mother did, she belonged to Armadale but my father, he pretended to! He belonged to Eriboll but he made up his Gaelic!

Natasha: Did they speak much Gaelic round the house?
Irene: Well if anybody else was in they spoke Gaelic so that we wouldn’t know what they were saying and all we knew was ‘agus’ and you know, just a few words. We didn’t know what they were saying.

Natasha: Was there much music going on in the house?
Irene: Well, my father played the fiddle and my brother played the fiddle and the accordion but the only thing we had was a paper and comb and a Jews harp and I think a mouth organ or two but that was it. It was mostly in the place wee button key accordions.

Natasha: Can you tell me about local cèilidhs when you were growing up?
Irene: Well I was never in a cèilidh in Armadale. We used to stay in Armadale all summer but in Rogart there were lots of cèilidhs and you always got tea and by the end of the evening there was always buns flying all over the place! They used to do monologues and there wasn’t music cause it was nearly all singing and monologues, you know funny stories and that.

Natasha: Were there bands playing locally?
Irene: Not when I was young but when I was a teenager we’d all like Jim MacLeod and other bands started coming then too.

Natasha: Can you tell me any stories about Gaelic and can you remember it being spoken in your community?
Irene: I’ve no stories but I remember cèilidhs in people’s houses. And they told stories and sang a lot. I used to go up to a friend of mine Kate, when I was living in Bettyhill and there was an awful funny one. There was some man, he lived in Farr and he talked in half Gaelic and half English. When the water went in, you know we had no water at one time, when it went into Bettyhill it hadn’t gone to Farr and he said “Water, water everywhere and not a lavender in Farr!” You know, he was meaning a lavatory!
Natasha: Do you know any local songs or tunes?
Irene: Well, they used to sing at the cèilidhs, both in Armadale and in Rogart, things like "Faithful Sailor Boy".

Natasha: How does the 'Faithful Sailor Boy' go?
Irene:
'It was on a dark and stormy night
The snow lay on the ground
A sailor boy stood on the quay
A ship was outward bound
His sweetheart standing by his side
She shed many a bitter tear
And as he clasped her to his heart
He whispered in her ear
Farewell, farewell my own true love
This parting gives me pain
You'll be my hope, my guiding star
Till I return again
My thoughts will be of you my love
When storms are raging high
And ever you be faithful too
Your faithful sailor boy'

Now it's very sad. It goes on to say how the boat was lost and then he is supposed to say on earth we will meet no more, with tears dripping over everyone's faces. It is a bonnie song and it was very popular.

Natasha: Was religion a big part of village life?
Irene: Yes, it was then, during Communion time. Now it's only one Sunday, twice a year but it used to be four days. It started on Thursday, we had a service and then you went on Friday. I don't know if you went on Saturday but you went on Sunday and on the Monday as well. We weren't allowed to do anything, if we played or did anything on a Sunday we got a row from my father, not that he went to church, but he still kept the Sabbath. There were so many of us he had a terrible difficulty trying to keep us quiet!

Natasha: So do you think it has changed a lot over the years?
Irene: Och yes, when I was young there was never a shop open on a Sunday. You would never dream of going to a shop on a Sunday and you didn't do anything. We weren't allowed to play outside we were just allowed to read and go for a walk but if you were running about and making a noise you really were in trouble!

Natasha: What difference can you see from when you were young with regard to music and Gaelic in your area?
Irene: Well, it's getting much more open, you know, your mother spoke Gaelic but they never wanted you to. They never taught us Gaelic, we never knew what they were saying. It's a good thing now that it's much more open to all and you get funding for teaching Gaelic. It's the same with music, we never got taught music we just knew it by ear. My father and my brother they did it by ear they never got taught.

“if we played or did anything on a Sunday we got a row from my father”

Mealanais (bent-grass headland)
Melness
Le Rossi Young
Liam: Can you tell me about where you were born and brought up?
Margaret: I was born in 1931, that's a long time ago! [laughing] I was born in Skelpick in Bettyhill, three miles up the river from Naver Bridge. It's a crofting place, and there were three other children as well as myself...My sister was seven years younger than me and I didn't know my mother was going to have a baby, I wasn't told anything at that stage. My mother sent me out to get the others to come in for their lunch and I went three times to the threshing floor to get them in for their lunch and they were too busy thrashing the corn and they wouldn't come in. So I went back and told my mother I couldn't get anybody so she said 'Go for Mrs MacNicol', so I went up there and said 'mam's wanting you urgently, I don't know what for but they'll not come in from the steading.' So she said 'Oh wait till I wash my hands' she was black leading the stove and...so she came down and delivered the baby! It was half past two in the afternoon.

Carol-Anne: And you knew nothing about it?
Margaret: No! So it was frost and ice, it was December 1937 and terrible frost and we couldn't get the nurse, she was stuck up Strath Naver...

Carol-Anne: What was your sister’s name?
Margaret: Irene. She was born wi’ black hair and all the rest of us were fair haired and so we always said that that was Mrs MacNicol wi’ the black lead! [laughing]

Liam: So where did you go to school?
Margaret: In the side school in Skelpick. There were only about seven pupils, the most that were ever there was about fourteen but mostly about six or seven. It was a tin hut place and it was very cold so we had to take a pan of fire along to the school to get the stove heated up quickly.

Liam: How did you get to the school?
Margaret: We walked, aye.

Carol-Anne: And what was the teacher?
Margaret: She was Dora Mackay from Swordly, Bettyhill and she cycled eight miles every day to teach us at the school. It took so long to get the fire going that I took a pan of kindlers with me every day to the school to get it started quick. My mother told me if my clothes caught fire then to roll on the ground.

Carol-Anne: That was good advice!

Liam: Was there much music in your house when you were growing up?
Margaret: Well, as we were growing up my father was musical, he could play the bagpipes and the accordion and my sister Emily, she was thirteen years younger than me, she did a lot of music, piano and that.

Carol-Anne: So your father played the bagpipes? Where did he learn the pipes?
Margaret: Well, he came from Golspie in Sutherland so he learnt there but I don’t remember who taught him.
Carol-Anne: Did he play in the house a lot?
Margaret: Yes, but he worked for the Duke of Sutherland so he was away a lot. It was my mother and my granny primarily that were in the house. So that was the way I didn’t learn to speak Gaelic, because my father didn’t speak Gaelic and my mother and my granny just talked to themselves but only when my father wasn’t there. It wasn’t very mannerly if he couldn’t understand. My granny had plenty Gaelic, she came from Strathy Point and she was hammered for speaking Gaelic when she went to school. She was so frightened of it that she used to lie in the corn fields all day and she wouldn’t go to school because she was so frightened. The result was that she was illiterate, she never learned to read or write. She was a very good communicator for all that and she taught me all I ever knew really. My granny was in the house then, she was part of the family and because there was so much work on the crofts, my granny was a major part because my mam went out to work.

Carol-Anne: And that would be the way in most families would it? With the men being at sea or whatever?
Margaret: Well yes, but my father worked for the Duke and that way we were never told about the Clearances until my own family grew up, I never really heard about it because they were so frightened. People were so frightened to say.

Liam: Was religion a big part of village life?
Margaret: Yes it was the culture of the village. We went to church every Sunday if possible but the weather was very bad then, the winters were so bad. We went in a horse and gig with my granny. The church is now closed though, it’s a museum, Strath Naver museum.

Carol-Anne: Would the services be in English or Gaelic Margaret?
Margaret: Well when I went with my granny to the Free Church, you got English and Gaelic. It was a visiting minister.

Liam: Can you tell us any information about cèilidhs in the areas when you were young?
Margaret: Well we used to have dances and that in the garage at the lodge. We used to play the paper and comb...At the small school, we had dances and cèilidhs in there, in the wee school I was talking about.

Liam: Were there a lot of bands that came to play locally?
Margaret: No, just the Melness band. Joseph Mackay and Iain Sutherland from Strath Naver too, he played the accordion, he played just solo.

Carol-Anne: So were there many playing the melodeon and accordion and things like that?
Margaret: Yes and the fiddle too. It was very off the cuff.

Liam: Where abouts were the cèilidhs held?
Margaret: In the school mainly.

Carol-Anne: Did they have cèilidhs in the houses?
Margaret: Yes, oh yes. There would be big crowds in the houses at New Year. My late husband used to sing Gaelic songs.

“Well we used to have dances and that in the garage at the lodge. We used to play the paper and comb...”

Baile na Cill (town of the church)
Balnakeil
Le Ceitidh Young
Liam: Were any of your family in the army?
Margaret: Yes, well Mackie, he was brought up wi’ me, he was an orphan. My mother brought him up in the house and he went into the Queens Own Scottish Borderers. So we were always looking forward to him coming home from the forces... When he got married and...there still wasn’t much to be got like in the way of clothes and everything, you had to have coupons. Mackie decided to get married and my mother got a hold of a basin and she said ‘There’s only one white shirt here that will do for getting married.’ So she had a basin with Parazone and everything and there must have been a wee hole on the basin and the rest went in the shirt and he couldn’t wear this shirt to get married! [laughing] So she had to go to Thurso and collect some money and there was one shirt left in ‘Threadsharers’ in Thurso! I was only eight when the war broke out and then we were kind of subdued with everything. We couldn’t have lights on in the buildings and that. I was going to say that we gathered sphagnum moss at the school for the soldiers, for the wounds. We sent it to the Red Cross. Sphagnum moss, we gathered it in the heather and sent bags of it to the soldiers. We were very frightened at the time because we didn’t know what the war was about. I was only eight and we got issued with gas masks at the school and getting exercises to fit them on. It was very worrying because we didn’t know what was going on and we heard that there was a raid, a bombing on Wick but there was only a rabbit killed! [laughing] This was the propaganda but it only turned up years later cause I had never seen Wick for twenty years after that, we seen that there were a lot of houses demolished with the bomb in Wick...We were told at the time that there was just a rabbit killed!

Liam: What differences can you see from when you were young and now with regards to music and Gaelic in the area?
Margaret: There’s a revival of the Gaelic and there’s more money for the Gaelic now and the older people are very delighted with that... and we can learn any words we forget on the Gaelic channel!

Carol-Anne: Were most people speaking Gaelic then?
Margaret: Yes...but they were trying to kill it at the time.

Liam: Were you allowed to speak Gaelic when you were at school?
Margaret: No, there was no Gaelic. We got nothing but the three R’s with your nose to the grindstone. We didn’t get any music in school. Our teacher didn’t dance or she wasn’t musical. We were very isolated in the side school, we didn’t mix with children and we were very shy when we went to Bettyhill to meet people. We couldn’t integrate very well... We were between eleven and twelve when we went to Helmsdale school, the senior school. We were there for four years.

Carol-Anne: So you would leave school when you were about fifteen? What did you do then?
Margaret: Yes, well I just worked on the croft and my father died and we were all trying to keep the croft going. My mother was a widow and he was self-employed so there was no money.

Liam: Where there any Highland Games locally?
Margaret: Yes, uh-huh we had British Legion sports in Clerkhill in Bettyhill. In this hotel park [Bettyhill Hotel], we had British Legion sports...and I used to earn some money for myself by running and all races and that. They came from all over and there were good prizes.

Carol-Anne: Was there music at that?
Margaret: Yes, there was piping. Willie Naver and Johnny the piper that came from Strath Halladale.

Carol-Anne: Were any of your folks involved in fishing?
Margaret: No just poaching! [laughing]
Claire: Can you tell me where you were born and brought up?
Edith: I was born in Inverness hospital forty six years ago and I was brought up in Strath Naver.

Claire: Where did you go to school and how did get there?
Edith: We went to Bettyhill school, the bottom half of the Strath went to Bettyhill school and the top half of the Strath went to Altnaharra school. We got there by school transport, by car and later on by school minibus.

Claire: Did you get taught any Gaelic at school?
Edith: Just a little, not much.

Claire: Did any of your family speak Gaelic?
Edith: No, but my granny did.

Claire: Was there any music in your house when you were growing up?
Edith: My dad played the accordion and my granny was a well known Gaelic singer and she was recorded by the BBC, she was well known for singing.

Claire: Was there a lot of dances on when you were growing up?
Edith: Yes...Mostly Scottish music but there were some discos too.

Claire: Where did they take place? Were they well attended?
Edith: Well, most local villages like Tongue, Strath Naver, Bettyhill, Skerry, Strathy had a dance every Friday or Saturday and Skerry always had a Christmas dance. Yes they were well attended, there were a lot of people going in them days.

Claire: Have you got any favourite memories from a dance?
Edith: I met my husband at a dance twenty seven years ago!

“*My dad played the accordion and my granny was a well known Gaelic singer and she was recorded by the BBC*”

Agallamh còmhla ri Edith Reid
Interview with Edith Reid
Com-pàirtichean Féis Air An Oir
Fèis Air An Oir Participants
‘S e òran air a sgrìobhadh le Seòras Gobha a th’ ann an Sgeir An Òir a tha a’ toirt a-staigh tòrr ainmean-àite na sgiere.

Sgeir An Òir is a local Gaelic song written by George Gow featuring many local place-names.

**Sgeir an Òir**

An tèid thu leam a ribhinn mhaiseach  
Am falbh thu leam a ribhinn òg?  
An tèid thu leum a ribhinn uasl  
Null air cuairt do Sgeir an Òir

Tha Caolais Thung’ na shealladh àlainn  
Suas Slòs Ardachadhachd nan Crann  
Far bheil na h-eòin ri ceileir samhraidh  
Is coileach dubh le gualan crom

Chì thu Beinn Laghail, s’ i cho àlainn  
Le sgoran àrd tha gorm le ceò  
Chì thu Beinn h-Òp is ionad àirigh  
Do na sprèidh nach gabh an croth

Tha Eilean Goill am beul a’ chaolais  
Eilean Neimh is Eilean Ròin  
An t-Eilean Creagach mach dheth D’leag  
Eilean Chaol is Dubh Sgeir Mhòr

Chì thu Rudh Shrathaidh is Rudh Thutaig  
Chì thu Putaig is an Cò  
Chì thu Faraid gorm a mhuran  
‘S ann ri thaobh tha Eilean Ho

Chì thu Rispond is an t-Aigeach  
Uaimh Dhiadhaidh is Rudha Ruadh  
Port nan Con is Badlhamhais  
Geò a’ bhàgh is Inbhir h-Òp
Fèis Air An Oir: Mackay Country
is one of a series of booklets produced by Fèis an Gàidheal as part of The Archiving Project where Fèis participants are collecting and recording songs, tunes, stories and folklore from their own areas.

Further details about the project can be found at: www.feisean.org/archivingproject

“Le bhith ag obair a-measg Fèisean ann an iomadh coinhearsnachd, bha mi riamh den bheachd gun robh còir aig na com-pàirtichean barrachd fhaighinn a-mach mu dhuilchas na gàire aca fhìn - na sgeulachdan agus an t-seòrsa cainnt a th’ aig na dàine - cho math ris na h-òrain agus an còil. Tha mi air leth toilichte gu bheil sin air tighinn tromhe anns a’ phróiseact laachmhior seo agus tha mi an dochas gum bi com-pàirtichean aig Fèisean a’ deannamh feum den stuth a chaidh a chrùinneachadh airson iomadh bhadhna fhathast a’ gur gum bi an t-sag an t-sag a chaidh a stèidheadadh.

Art MacCarmaig, Stiùiriche, Fèisean nan Gàidheal

Working with Fèisean in many communities, I was always of the opinion that participants should find out more about the heritage of their own area - the stories and the language of the people - as well as the songs and the music. I am extremely happy that is what is coming through this valuable project and I hope that Fèis participants will make use of the materials collected for many years to come and will add to the archive that has been established.”

Arthur Cormack, Director, Fèisean nan Gàidheal