

A VERY UNCOMMON LAND

When I retired to Dornoch 22 years ago, my wife and I took a stroll up Grange Road to look at the golf course. We were astonished to see that bungalows had been built on the edge of the championship course, thus stopping the extension of Grange Road round the edge of Bishopfield to join the Embo road, as surely the Victorians intended.

As it happened, a Planning Meeting was being held in the Social Club a few evenings later about other matters. It was poorly attended, so I was able to question Colonel Gilmour and Mr Polson as to why they had allowed the building of bungalows so close to the championship course and had not provided a splendid boulevard instead. They replied that they had received no objection from the Golf Club and the local Councillor had given his tacit approval. The Captain of Royal Dornoch Golf Club at that time was one of the first to build a bungalow along the line. It was then that I decided that I would stand for the District Council.

To be fair, at that time the Community Council had no input into planning matters, it was in the control of the Regional Council. Later I was told that the cash generated by the sale of this Council owned land to private buyers was spent on council housing in Kinlochbervie. Sutherland County Council, Sutherland District Council and even the Highland Council Area Committee members never looked too kindly on Dornoch which, admittedly, was going through a bad phase.

Skibo was in dire straits, Dornoch Academy was due for closure; the Eagle (my old pub) was closed and Grants of Dornoch (our major employer) teetered on bankruptcy. There was one really good thing going for us, the new Dornoch Firth Bridge, the last of the bridges across the firths would bring us into the periphery of the Inverness City Region, the economic heart of the Highlands, the fastest growing city in Western Europe. Dornoch was on a roll – but nobody saw it.

At the next District Council election, I won the seat for Dornoch Burgh and set to work on finding out about the Common Good Lands. Land management was my forte and it took time to learn the arcane system of local government and its committee system. I first discovered that there was no map of the Common Land, so this was put in hand. A copy of the new map, showing the 140 hectares can be seen in the Dornoch Library, hanging behind the Librarian's desk. The next step was to walk the whole area, along with the tenants. The tenants are Royal Dornoch Golf Club, the Bowling Club, the Caravan Site, Scottish Water and later the Inshore Lifeboat Association. The airstrip is administered by TEC Services at the Highland Council, then known as the Roads Department. The Highland Council's lease map of the Royal Dornoch Golf Club lease could not be found, but later a copy did appear. I suspect that they hastily made a copy at the Golf Club.

It was found that the Golf Club had trespassed outside their boundary at the greenkeepers' sheds. They were also removing turf from areas not within their lease. This resulted in them starting their own turf nursery. Encroachment was going on in the Littletown area and the resident of the first house beyond Grange Road was claiming ownership of half of the second hole. These matters were all eventually resolved.

The major rental income came from the Caravan Site and Scottish Water, since the Golf Club had a ~~long~~ lease at a peppercorn rent granted to them by the old Town Council during their last few days, at the urging of some prominent members of the Golf Club, who were also Town Councillors. They should not have been allowed to take part in the debate or vote, since they had an interest to declare, but that is all water under the bridge. At the same time, the Town Council sold on the Town Jail and Drill Hall for £10,000 and spent it on building chalets to house incoming bakers who under 'Pie' Mackay baked pies for the labour force at Nigg. This all important asset was lost to Dornoch for no lasting good. As I was to find out in my 15 year career as a councillor, politicians love spending public money and will readily sell assets to do this. The last fling of the Sutherland Area Committee was to spend £5 million on the Drummuie project when any cost benefit analysis would have rejected it.

The beach car park was in a poor state in that deep fissures had been allowed to occur where people ran to the beach. These were filled in and turfed and the bank was topped with a fence to stop it happening again and the area was tarred afresh.

Another problem was that vehicles were driven off road beyond the Struie Course across the airstrip and into the salt marshes, even up to the Point. Boy racers held midnight Grand Prix events from one end of the airstrip to the other. The two SSI flower meadows were being thrashed by vehicles. A plan was drawn up with SNH to put in hundreds of wooden stobs to stop the access of vehicles to the area, which is now the sole preserve of walkers and is greatly appreciated by locals, residents of Tain and beyond and of course holidaymakers. This is a mixture of wildflower meadows, salt marsh, dunes, rivulets and creeks. Any 'development' of the airstrip to accommodate the wishes of light plane owners living in Inverness, Invergordon and beyond are not in the interests of Dornoch. Land and take off by all means, but do not stay, should be our motto. The cost of upkeep is cutting the grass which is done by the Golf Club and if Highland Council can no longer afford this, then a little arm twisting at the Golf Club should be undertaken.

Our current Councillor has got the Sutherland County Show very well organised. The ugly wire sheep fanks have been removed, a new exit road established and splendid new tents provide a modern and smart appearance to what had become tatty and rundown looking. Horses should be kept off the airstrip.

When Grants of Dornoch went into receivership, Royal Dornoch Golf Club purchased their land from the old municipal rubbish dump at the Meadows round to the Black Burn. Later they acquired the field between the 8th green of the top course and the Embo Burn beside the Embo Caravan Site. This immediately provided the Club with an excellent sand pit. This brings us almost up to date, but not quite.

Tensions between the town and Golf Club had often been fractious and during 1930 when the Town Council decided to construct a road past the first tee to the beach, it resulted in a long drawn out legal battle between the Town Council and the Golf Club which beggared them both and merely enriched the lawyers. Strangely enough, the Provost at that time, John Murray, worked in the same Tea Company as I did many years later. We had the strange conflict waged on behalf of the Town Council by the Clerk, John Sutherland, who then cycled to the Golf Club Office to reply on their behalf as the Secretary of the Golf Club. He wore two hats.

There must be a better way of managing our Common Land, the pride of Dornoch, an invaluable asset in the community, than the laissez faire attitude that now prevails, hence my suggestion to set up a Dornoch Links Trust, based on the St Andrews Links Trust. Alternatively, an Act of the Scottish Parliament could protect all remaining Common Land in Scotland from cash strapped Councils.

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