

The Uses of Huts

In January, hedge-fund manager Alexander Darwall won his legal case against Dartmoor National Park, arguing successfully that the well-established right to camp in the park, including on his 4,000-acre Blachford Estate, had never legally existed. As a result, all wild camping on Dartmoor now requires permission from the landowner. The decision prompted a wave of outrage, extending far beyond those quarters where a keen interest in land rights could be assumed, coloured by a new awareness of the vested interests that condition our access to public space.

A week earlier I had been in the Cairngorms on Inshriach Farm, south-west of Aviemore, staying in a little hut constructed from wooden slats and corrugated iron on a heather-clad hillside. Its interior was an ingenious arrangement of arms-length surfaces and contraptions with a snug mezzanine sleeping quarter. 'It's designed to have everything you need in there, within reach,' says artist and founder of Bothy Project, Bobby Niven, as we chat over the phone a couple of weeks later. Visually, Inshriach Bothy has less in common with the squat dry-stone highland bothy of imagination than with the sleekly functional *hytte* (huts) of Nordic families. Another influence on Niven and his co-designer, architect Iain MacLeod, was the area's 'vernacular agricultural architecture', Bobby says, from cow byres to barns.

Completed in 2012, Inshriach Bothy was the first building in Bothy Project's network of artist's accommodation, which now extends to the Isle of Eigg (site of Sweeney's Bothy), and until recently included central Edinburgh, where Pig Rock Bothy stood for six years in the grounds of the National Gallery of Modern Art. Bothy Project offers a range of residencies, including a themed series in 2021, the Neighbourhood Residencies, for which the network was extended to include Assynt Art Studio in the far north-west of Scotland, on the community-owned Assynt Estate. Local participants from various backgrounds - including artists, writers, scientists and activists - came together into three groups to make common use of the properties in Assynt & Coigach, the Small Isles and Badenoch & Strathspey (Assynt Art Studio, Sweeney's Bothy and Inshriach respectively), and then recorded a series of talks shared as podcasts. Risograph posters were made for display in community buildings.



Calum Wallis, *Tormore Canvas Walk*, 2022, performance

This year, a further series of talks and activities is planned as part of a new public programme. There is also advanced discussion about extending the bothy network further. Yet my visit to Inshriach turned out to be a swansong for the site. Walter Micklethwait, landlord of the Inshriach Estate - which also contains a gin distillery and a Wild West-style saloon - is making space for new ventures. The retirement of the project there is amicable, but it alludes to the slim basis of interests on which decisions about the use of private land can be made. Indeed, while there is a certain ingrained smugness among some Scots regarding their right to roam and camp - codified by the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 - any sense of superiority to Little England should be adopted with caution.

As journalist Lesley Riddoch notes in her 2020 book *Huts: A Place Beyond*, just 432 individuals or interests (0.008% of the population) own half the private land in Scotland, 'the most concentrated pattern of land ownership anywhere in the world'. In Norway, Riddoch's point of comparison, the great outdoors has for centuries been a shared asset, with a far higher number of owners each claiming a small patch. One result is that the country's fields, riverbanks and forests are peppered with little wooden *hytte*, often handed down through families across generations, used for recreation and creativity.

There was a hutting movement in Scotland, too, dating to the interwar years as in Norway, but it was never as strong, and it faltered across the late 20th century. During the 1990s, one of the few remaining collective sites, at Carbeth, was subject to rent hikes by the landowner, Allan Barns-Graham (nephew of Wilhelmina Barns-Graham). When the hutters refused to pay, the ringleaders were taken to court and several huts mysteriously burned down. The story had a happy ending, with the tenants winning the right to buy out the land as a community company in 2013. However, the whole saga speaks of the practical and emotional residues of feudalism. As Riddoch notes, 'for almost 1,000 years Scots have endured a system where someone else has always had control over land and property'.

Niven brings up parallels to the hutting movement during our discussion of Bothy Project. But when the project started he was rather influenced by the Californian hippie architect Lloyd Kahn, whose 1973 book *Shelter*, republished countless times, shows self-build techniques from around the world since prehistory. Nonetheless, Bothy Project partly represents an attempt to instil in one fragment of Scotland's population a sense of connectedness to the natural world - and to the possibility of self-sustaining rural communities and economies - that the country's Laird-quashed hutting movement never quite established. After all, as Riddoch notes, something like hutting has taken hold in every other part of the world with a 'wooded latitude', from the US to the Baltic states.

All this, of course, is to say nothing directly of the history of the bothy. Geoff Allan, in *The Scottish Bothy Bible*, notes that the term 'comes from the old Gaelic *bothan* (via the old Irish *both*) meaning hut' - a semantic link to the wider phenomenon Riddoch explores - and originally referred to as 'rudimentary accommodation provided by landowners for bachelor farm labourers or estate workers who tended livestock and crops'. The vast majority of bothies are stone-built 'single-storey crofts, farmsteads, or estate houses'. Many such dwellings were abandoned after the Second World War,

Riddoch notes, due to ‘the advent of jeeps, centralised farm production and eviction of tenant farmers’. The practice of ‘secretly staying overnight’ in bothies developed around this time, though it was formalised by the formation of the Scottish Mountain Bothies Association in 1965.

The differences with the Scandinavian paradigm are, in one sense, sobering. Rather than being custom-built structures handed down through families, bothies are effectively reclaimed hovels, built for indentured labourers turfed out when their services were no longer required. Nonetheless, there is something invigorating in the outlaw status of bothy culture: the idea of spontaneously, collectively established patterns of communal use established around and in spite of the law, ultimately becoming the law.

What kind of work is produced by Bothy Project artists? There is another angle on the whole idea of the ‘hut’, informed by a philosophical and poetic tradition that can barely be scraped at here. It encompasses the woodland retreat as both enabling site and conceptual motif in Martin Heidegger’s metaphysics, an idea of thought as crucially informed by geographical location – and by a certain liminality to the metropolis – that is extended and problematised in writing by Paul Celan and JH Prynne. In a series of poetic expositions called ‘Hutopia’, the poet Alec Finlay cultivates an idea of the hut as a site of provisional belonging that is nonetheless alive to wider political realities: ‘the watch-tower and border post are kinds of hut’, the sequence reminds us. Almost all of ‘Hutopia’ was written during a Bothy Project residency at Inshriach before being exhibited at Venice’s Fondazione Prada in 2018.

Other residents have taken a different approach to the politics of hut-dwelling, more closely engaged with the local situation. The writer Sarah Bernstein, a Neighbourhood Residencies participant, explains to me over Zoom from her home in Achiltibuie, Wester Ross, how her time at Assynt Art Studio allowed her to explore issues around local housing markets. As across so much of the Highlands, the second-home economy is gutting villages like Achiltibuie of permanent inhabitants, while distorting costs so that local families and young people are forced to move away. The situation became particularly stark during the Covid-19 travel ban, ‘because a big majority of the houses in the village were just uninhabited for two years’.

There is something about being situated, albeit briefly, in a place beyond the economic circumstances to which a rural artist is accustomed that allows this kind of critical reflection. ‘It is supposed to be a rupture from the norm,’ Bothy Project director Lesley Young tells me, in similar spirit, ‘the residencies are about solitude, not necessarily about isolation’. This kind of solitude can also engender a more optimistic, future-oriented form of creativity. Helen McCrorie, another Bothy Project resident, uses her work to explore the recently established tradition of rural community buyouts. Her partner’s family hails from Eigg, where she has completed both her stints with Bothy Project, and whose 1997 community purchase set the ball rolling on a whole range of similar projects, from Assynt to Comrie in Perthshire, the artist’s current home.

In 2007, Comrie Development Trust, with whom McCrorie has worked for several years, completed one of the most audacious and poetically resonant buyouts of recent years. Cultybraggan is a former MoD camp that was used to intern high-ranking SS officers at the end of Second World War and used as a nuclear bunker site during the Cold War. Now, McCrorie tells me over the phone, the old Nissen huts house small businesses and artists’ studios, while in the community orchard espalier apple trees climb the walls of a disused assault course. There is a community-run museum and a bakery.

McCrorie’s film *If play is neither inside nor outside, where is it?*, first shown at Collective, Edinburgh in 2019, follows members of a toddler’s playgroup as they dart in and out of brutalist military structures flanked by bracken and wild grasses. Apples ripen while birds and bumblebees accompany the children’s chanting and singing. McCrorie is interested in DW Winnicott’s idea of play as a means of establishing relations with external reality. *If play* presents a former site of violent, state-mediated discipline being redefined as a space for anarchistic expression. It features a periodic voice-over from the artist’s teenage daughter: ‘We turn prisons into playgrounds, a firing range into a den ... This is our anarchic realm, we keep laws at bay.’ Keeping the law at bay: maybe that is what bothies are for, too.

Greg Thomas is a critic and editor based in Glasgow.



Robbie Synge, *All of Us*, 2022, research material