

**Andrew Raven Trust SC039488**  
**Fifth Annual Weekend Gathering**  
**Ardtornish, 17<sup>th</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup> June 2011**  
**Theme: “Paths”**

### **Introduction**

This was the fifth weekend organised by the Andrew Raven Trust. Each year the Trust has brought together a group of people from across the country, who may or may not be known to each other, but all of whom share a strong interest in rural Scotland, whether through their geographical location, their roots, their work or wider. This year’s theme was chosen to explore the pleasure and significance of paths from many perspectives.

Picking a bunch of people from scattered habitats and transplanting them together somewhat exotically for a weekend is a bit of a gamble, but which always seems to engender a sense of community, however brief, and a feeling of renewal and purpose. The loveliness of Ardtornish house and its setting, the pleasure of old-fashioned comforts, and the warmth of those who host the process are all part of the magic, but there is a deeper thing which takes place too. One of the most abiding images of this year’s weekend was the *birlinn* (the west coast galley of history), with its lovely metaphor of the human voyage and the stormy seas confronting us, but also perhaps answering a question about the nature of these Ardtornish weekends – the *birlinn* as an emblem of the power that we find when thrown together in mutual endeavour.

So why paths? The Andrew Raven Trust’s *raison d’etre* is to consider (from the rural perspective) the state we’re in, and to investigate how we might respond positively in a time of change and challenge, individually and collectively. Paths are a simple expression of our connectedness with the world and our activities within it. They are universally recognisable, and as such, are layered with millennia of meaning, both practical and philosophical. Thus this fifth weekend was energised by a combination of many different perspectives and interpretations of the theme, in which the practical element of path-building was as much a form of language as the making of a poem. As was observed on Sunday, this was a theme which rested lightly on the discussions.

In planning the programme, Trustees had been reflecting on questions about why it is so difficult to navigate change. An example from a previous weekend was the challenge of providing sustainable rural housing (see <http://www.andrewraventrust.org.uk/memorial-weekend-2008.php>). Part of the answer to this lies in how we communicate – how we explain ourselves to others, the complexity which is needed to describe a case, how we listen and understand, or don’t. And in which the arts can give us ways to think, see and feel, tell, hear and know differently. Hence this year’s programme with its mix of poetry and path-building.

### **FRIDAY EVENING**

This opening part of the weekend was spent setting the scene, letting participants mingle and settle as a group, and bringing attention down to the present place - Morvern and the Ardtornish Estate. This was also the opportunity for those involved with the Trust to reflect on their own thoughts about paths.

**Angus Robertson** (Estate Manager and Trustee of ART) explained how the Ardtornish Estate seeks to be self-financing and sustainable, whilst supporting the community and maintaining the natural capital of the land. Eggs are distributed amongst numerous baskets – farming, forestry, stalking, fishing, tourism, and with the newer addition of hydro-energy (one scheme recently completed, one under construction – 2 megawatts of power in the offing). And the Estate is now embarked on developing a new township of affordable housing.

On how the meaning of paths here has changed over time, Angus showed us an archaeological map of Morvern in 1800 in which nestled dozens of settlements. At this time the population was about 2000, there were no roads as we know them today, but doubtless a network of paths connecting place to place, people to people. Now, the people are much fewer (300), the place has miles of modern roads and vastly more vehicular traffic, whilst paths are for visitors and leisure. (Is there commentary here about the shift in distribution of resources per person over time? Would “miles of tar per person” give a useful inverse index of community cohesion? Less might well be more.)

**Hugh Raven** (Estate Managing Director) reflected on the value of these Ardtornish weekends. Fun was an important element. After a long working week people need to relax. The mansion house was built for pleasure and it can still offer that for these weekends. Then there were the useful connections made between participants (the Trust’s alumni now numbering about 120 people), and those connections extending out into Ardtornish – introducing people to the place and its activities. There was the value of the different viewpoints, both for the Trust, and for the Estate and its community. Looking ahead, Ardtornish was considering establishing a Writer’s Residency recognising the long tradition of artistic inspiration which comes through land and landscape, and a sense of place.

#### **“Follow the Master” – Film by Matt Hulse**

After dinner we watched a film by the Edinburgh artist Matt Hulse (<http://anormalboy.wordpress.com/matt-hulse-cv/>).

This is the visual record of a walk with his girlfriend along the South Downs Way. The film was made in memoriam for his grandfather, and has the feel of a sort of pilgrimage. By turns funny and serious, reverent and irreverent, it comprises a set of images, often apparently inconsequential, about the physical path and the moments and happenings along the way, cross-referenced with the connections of family. One appalling yet typically comical sequence, particularly memorable in the context of the weekend, was where the South Downs Way crosses a motorway. Here the walkers emerge from quiet country lanes to teeter (it seems interminably) on the edge of the traffic’s unrelenting madness, waiting for a safe moment to hurl themselves across and disappear once more into the safety of the woods. We knew what the walkers were about, but where on earth were all those cars going?!

#### **SATURDAY MORNING**

The day began, as is traditional, with a brisk walk after breakfast to see the continuing development of the Estate’s hydro energy capacity (see reports from previous weekends at [www.andrewraventrust.org.uk](http://www.andrewraventrust.org.uk)). This year we looked at the on-going preparations for a second hydro scheme, which serendipitously included what might be termed “path works” – the construction of a new access road. Lying as it does along the Estate’s main right of way, the design of this “path” had been a challenging exercise in which Angus had been at pains to avoid harsh intrusion in the landscape and find instead some “sexy curves”. By unwinding the route within the context and confines of the ground, the thing which was most striking about this new road was how old it looked, and how natural. Which stimulated thoughts about the virtue in necessity, and how the straight lines of engineering can be made beautiful with a little art.

#### **Introduction to “Paths” theme and the reader by Professor Nigel Leask**

Nigel Leask is Regius Professor of English at Glasgow University and a long-standing visitor to Ardtornish. His introduction to the weekend’s keynote speaker, poet Tom Clark, reflected his own interest in the ways in which we describe the importance of our connections with nature, and the Romantic writings of the eighteenth century as an early example of this.

The theme of “Paths” was a challenging one but rich in possibilities for dialogue and as such, long attractive to poets. Thus William Blake in his *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: “Improvement makes straight roads, but the crooked roads without improvement are roads of Genius”, and even earlier, Robert Burns wrote “I have such an aversion to right line and method, that when I can’t get over the hedges that bound the highway, I zig-zag across the road just to keep my hand in”.

But another metaphor, in the Highland context, carried a mixed message. General Wade’s roads, built in the 1720s and 30s to bring “improvement”, were at first shunned by the Highlanders, who stuck resolutely to paths “beaten down already, by the clansmen and the clansmen’s cattle, trails that both preferred as easier for the feet” (from *The New Road*, Neil Munro). However, these same roads later proved most serviceable to the Jacobite army as it marched southwards, and indeed Munro’s sympathies were ultimately with the road-makers as agents of Scotland’s transition into modernity. Might the weekend open a conversation between walking the straight path of improvement and the crooked path of Genius? (And is there another lesson here, that what we first shun we may later find quite useful, like the Forth Rail Bridge?)

### **Paths and Fruits – Poetry reading by Tom (Thomas A) Clark**

Contemporary Scottish poet Tom Clark has a strong interest in the relationship of man and nature and the theme of paths and walking is a recurrent one in his work. Born in Greenock, he is now based in Pittenweem where he runs the Cairns Gallery with his wife, artist Laurie Clark. He has published several collections of poetry, including the 2009 long poem “A Hundred Thousand Places”. His poetry is above all attentive; he is probably a modernist but doubtless of the zig-zag persuasion. (<http://thomasaclarkblog.blogspot.com/>).

In a room full of people with practical skills, Tom was wondering what a poet could contribute. Around this theme of paths, was there also doubt or unease? – about the future, about how much we care, what we can do – and was this where poetry came into it? As he put it, (non-poetic) language heads out and goes till it delivers its cargo of meaning. In writing, it moves left to right across the page. But poetry is more like a path - it doubles back, delays the sense of arrival or closure for the pleasure of details, and diverts and slows language, divesting it of its commercial delivery system.

To hear Tom Clark read his poems was to be there with him on the walk; a sense of complete presence, understanding the world in new (and forgotten) ways through all the senses. Most of all, his poems compel us to remember the world that is there, intricate and beautiful, and how we are entirely a part of it. Thus begins “In Praise of Walking”:

*Early one morning, any morning, we can set out, with the least possible baggage, and discover the world.*

*It is quite possible to refuse all the coercion, violence, property, triviality, to simply walk away.*

*That something exists outside ourselves and our preoccupations, so near, so readily available, is our greatest blessing.*

*Walking is the human way of getting about.*

There was also humour – and encouragement - for the journey (“In Praise of Walking” again):

*What I take with me, what I leave behind, are of less importance than what I discover along the way.  
To be completely lost is a good thing on a walk.*

*The most distant places seem accessible once one is on the road.*

*Convictions, directions, opinions, are of less importance than sensible shoes.*

The attitudes we might bring to paths are in the thinking behind “Paths and Fruits”:

*To approximate less to oak or rock than air, mist or smoke  
To be transparent, displacing nothing  
To step in or out of time  
Detaching till days take on depth, clarity, extent.*

Finally, though his voice is gentle there is an unmistakable urging in his words. So his first line to us, from “On Paths”, a short poem he wrote for the occasion, was this:

*Let morning find you on the path.*

### **Response by Professor Jeffrey Robinson**

Jeffrey Robinson, Honorary Senior Research Fellow at the Department of English Literature, University of Glasgow and Professor of English Emeritus from University of Colorado gave a response to Thomas A Clark’s readings. A full transcript of his response may be read here ([link](#)). He quoted the line from “In Praise of Walking”

*That something exists outside ourselves and our preoccupations, so near, so readily available, is our greatest blessing*

as a way of encapsulating his understanding of the principles of the poetry we had just been listening to: an encouragement to attentiveness catalysed through the pace and rhythm of walking recollected through the pace and rhythm of poetry.

His response explored Clark’s use of poetic language, its impact on the reader/listener and embedded this in a wider context of historical walking literature “for over 200 years writers seem to have intuited an affinity between walking and words”. He concluded by suggesting that Tom Clark offers “a rare contemporary invitation to encounter – through mind, eye and words – the life on the pathway”.

### **Discussion**

Throughout the reading people had been immensely attentive and focussed, and when we had the chance to share our thoughts, reflections went very deep and wide.

- All matter is movement, flow, energy. Paths (and new hydro roads) are designs that we bring to the natural world. Going with the flow is often recommended, but we may be better to go against; we need to interrupt the flow to produce electricity, melody – blow through a tube, put a stone in the burn. Human life makes use by temporarily interrupting or restructuring nature.
- The cells that we’re made of are semi-permeable – the world flows back and forth through us continuously. Life is a wave process too – birth, growth, decay, death.
- The observer in Tom’s poems walks alone, seeking attentiveness and self-unconsciousness. It’s a problem for humans at present to get beyond self-concern.
- We need to accept ourselves as only part of the big flow and ebb; forgive ourselves when our designs on nature may be innocent or virtuous enough (hydro dams and access roads).
- The Gaelic culture reflects proximity to the natural world, and a sense of wonderment and charged energy. It is not cynical or exploitative, instead brightness and sacredness are present. Gaelic names hang on in paths and in poetry; Wade’s roads are often ignored.
- Does walking create creativity? John Clare “.. found the poems in the fields, And only wrote them down”. Verse is made of feet; and verso is the turning of the plough at the end of the furrow.

- On the value of getting lost, or veering off the path – difficult now to get university funding for speculative wanderings.
- Lessons for the Andrew Raven Trust in not arriving before leaving (don't ask what the aim is) – the weekends are incremental, a zig-zag path not a super-highway, with conversations across different terrains which resonate beyond themselves.

## SATURDAY AFTERNOON

### Three path makers

After a break for lunch, in preparation for the afternoon's physical activities (walking and path-building) we heard the viewpoints of three people whose involvement with paths is more hands-on. All three are path makers.

**Chris Bacon** is a retired paediatrician from Yorkshire, who has been tenant of Inninmore on the Sound of Mull since the mid 1960s. Getting to this cottage involves a hardy hike along a path through woods, skirting steep slopes and crags of crumbling basalt, and crossing numerous burns. The path doesn't keep itself open for human use; accordingly, family and friends have gained much practical (and philosophical) experience of path maintenance. Lesson one is that a path is a thing you have to work at. Winter rains bring landslips and rocks. Big rocks bring broken trees (and the cross cut saw provides valuable lessons on choosing a mate). Burns spate, bridges go, brambles grow, the path gets unwisely diverted. Happily, many visitors have been lured by the promise of a good bottle at journey's end, and access to fine tools along the way.

Lesson two – path maintenance is good fun. There is camaraderie, and that profound pleasure to be had from one's visible progress at the end of the day. The walking is a delight. These two things (working and walking the path) have provided quite as much pleasure over the years as the destination (lesson three).

(Details of Chris' book, published last year - "Between the Woods and the Sea – the story of a cottage in Morvern", available from <http://www.ardtornish.co.uk/newsitem.asp?itemid=3645>, see 12.06.2011 - Inninmore – the definitive story).

**John Dye** writes a monthly column in the local newspaper about walks he organises for local children in Moidart, seeking to provide them the chance to walk and understand the landscape they live in, and how to interpret its paths, woods, walls, and other ancient indications. (See [www.sunartoakwoods.org.uk/johndye/expeds/expeds.htm](http://www.sunartoakwoods.org.uk/johndye/expeds/expeds.htm)). These "Explorer Group" walks are very popular, taken up with enthusiasm. Whilst insurance requires that each child brings along a "responsible adult", in fact the children become very responsible themselves as their sense of ownership develops. John has been doing these walks for 30 years, and intends to keep going until he gets a second generation of walkers established.

A growing skein of paths he has added to his local map reveals a lack of detail on the part of the Ordnance Survey. He reflected on the changing patterns of movement/pathways in Moidart. In the past, Moidart's rivers were an appalling danger, with drownings an annual tragedy, so bridges were one of the biggest breakthroughs for the area. Boats are still often the best way to get about, moving round the shore (and Inninmore inhabitants sometimes now luxuriate in this mode of access). Historically, the coast provided easier access to food as well, and it wasn't until invaders came in bigger, better boats (slave traders and thieves) that the locals moved inland and up the hill. So this was when Moidart's paths grew.

**Boyd Henderson** happened almost accidentally on a career which has taken hold of him, building,

maintaining and repairing footpaths in the Scottish hills. In the course of his work, walkers often stop to chat and ask questions about what he is doing. So rather than tell us what he might think we would want to know, he invited us to imagine we were encountering him there on a path, and to ask him what we would.

What tools does he take to his work, and what materials – local or imported? Tools are usually carried in; materials used to be mined on site, and still are at high altitudes, but the increasing pressure on footpaths means that they are often now flown in by helicopter.

Are there subsidies for path building and maintenance? Yes, there are grants from SNH and through the SRDP, though these are usually tied to “footfall”, that is, per thousands of people per annum. Not so useful for quieter or local paths. It is heavy erosion and visible scars which attract funding. Presumably on the open hill, paths are mainly about water? Yes – vital to prevent the path from becoming a burn. Interestingly, the ditch and its shadow are often more visible from a distance than the path itself (subtle lesson here for how we measure our impacts, and about making sure we measure the relevant thing?)

Do builders of hill paths also seek sexy lines (as per Angus Robertson’s hydro access road)? Yes indeed, though theirs are thinner. Often they watch walkers and their preferences to find the “desire lines” of a path. Then they use “light touch” techniques to gently steer people onto better routes, helping to control erosion maybe just by the subtle placement of a boulder here or there.

Is there ever opposition to his work? Yes - there are those who would prefer there to be no paths in the hills and places where that may be appropriate, but the pressure of use often demands a path – the erosion scar on Stac Pollaidh was 62m wide.

Do the path builders go in to work by helicopter? No, they usually walk. Building a path at two or three thousand feet, this approach brings a fine focus to the job.

### **Walking and making**

For the remainder of the afternoon, the weekenders were invited to split themselves into two groups, according to their bent. One group would walk a path, the other would make one, and all going according to plan (which it didn’t!), the first group would complete their circuit back from hill to shore by coming down the new path. The following account from Nigel Leask goes some way to explaining why the twain never met! [\(LINK to photos??\)](#)

### **Path walkers**

After lunch we set off down the loch side road towards the fish farm and Old Ardtornish – having been divided into two groups, ‘path walkers’ and ‘path makers’, and I’m in the first (safely middle-aged group), my young daughters in the more adventurous, second group. We turn up the steep path from the road to the SE towards Tennyson’s waterfall (commemorating the Poet Laureate’s visit to Ardtornish in 1853), suitably paved with the variety of fossils known as ‘Devil’s Toenails’, and halt for breath at the first point where we could command a view across Lochaline towards the sandmine and village. Here John Dye introduced us to the visible landscape before our eyes, and even more compellingly, to the less visible one beneath our feet. He points out a tiny black spider with what looked like a white hump on its back, apparently its fragile egg, as it scuttled solicitously amongst the damp grass, through bright yellow tormentil and buttercups. Further up he indicates a rare wild orchid, brilliantly pink, that allowed only one single local bee to enter and pollenate, a remarkable example of finely-honed Darwinian co-existence between animal and vegetable. John can see things in the miniature world beneath us that are hidden to less practiced eyes, but it is his

gift to make them visible.

As usual (at least in sociable walks) I'm talking as much as walking, enjoying that that wonderful broken conversation whose rhythm is set by the pace of walking up hill, or through copses and dense bracken, interspersed with breath catching and wheezing. John Purser is telling me about Bonny Rideout, the American fiddler with whom he's collaborated on two magnificent recent recordings, about bronze age horns, about Freemasonic symbolism in the Duke of Hamilton's mausoleum, about his father's Sean's career as a lecturer in the English Literature Dept at Glasgow, where I now hold a chair, and a hundred other fascinating things. We reach Tennyson's waterfall, and John and Mark decide to risk the slippery boulders to climb round behind the water – I follow, and manage to get there without breaking my neck. The linn cascades out in front of our eyes, showering us with spray. John Dye has found a rare lichen on a boulder, and has the gift of making this an exciting moment for the botanically-challenged (although my relationship with Ardtornish has done wonders for my appreciation of Scottish flora and fauna, especially the huge variety of wild plants and bird-life). We keep on climbing, and the view gets more and more breath-taking, but we're beginning to realise that we're not going to meet the path builders, whom it turns out, are a quarter of a mile further down the path, busy doing their thing. (My daughter Isabel and her friend Maya, it turns out, have turned into tree-huggers and are cheekily obstructing the removal of a tree bough standing in the way of the emerging path.) Mark is telling me about the Scottish Book Trust and holidays in Puglia, and I chat to Maggie about the drive to improve international recruitment to Scottish universities, as she relates her impressive record of scientific collaborations across the globe. Its beginning to get a wee bit wet, but we're all in that walking mode where it hardly matters, as we reach the top and begin to descend through woodland and boggy paths back to the road. But our path this afternoon never struck the new one – walking that will be a pleasure held over for another day: we've had enjoyment enough here in any case.

### **Path makers**

Meanwhile, the path makers' group was engaged in another kind of attentiveness. We were not actually constructing a brand new path across virgin terrain, but renovating an old path connecting the shore road to a path through newly planted woodland higher up the hill. In the past, this route would have been a shortcut across the hillside, quicker and drier underfoot than following the flat ground round the coast. Happily for an impromptu and untested team this involved a number of different activities.

We started where a new bridge had been set across the ditch at the roadside, where Mandy chapped in the first of the signposts. At this point, glancing up the boggy hillside, and knowing there was amongst other things a bridge to be built somewhere out of sight, the idea that we would complete the task before midnight seemed a bit remote. But Angus Robertson and Alan Davidson of Ardtornish had been busy in advance, taking time to think through the logic of the exercise, and what this unlikely team would need in the way of materials and tools. With great mindfulness, the squared oak signposts (run from Morvern oak) not only carried the Trust's logo, but each came furnished with a little plywood cap to protect the top from the blows of the sledge hammer.

So, first post in place, we proceeded up the path, pausing to survey the line ahead, bunching and spreading like a rather wonky necklace, and shedding on the way small clumps of folk to tackle one job or another. Children snipped saplings and lopped at overgrowing branches; bigger people sawed through fallen trees, and shouldered tools and posts on up the path; Will and Boyd lost themselves in finding the perfect placement of a single stepping stone in a burn. Admittedly, we also engaged in that ancient human activity of offering each other unsought and sometimes unhelpful advice. Sometimes we lapsed rather lengthily in strategic considerations, but time nipped at our heels. Should this long branch of beech be cut back or left for the fun of climbing on it? Leave it! Where

exactly should the next signpost go? Too close to the last one - no, not visible from here - left a bit, right a bit... yup, just there!

Contrary to Nigel's impression this group did not exclude the middle-aged, nor were we necessarily more adventurous, although it is interesting to wonder how we all so quickly identified ourselves as being the one thing or the other. The path makers had really nothing in common except a shared intent and a short afternoon. Some of us were familiar with the sort of ad hoc engineering that such a task requires, others had scarcely held a hammer before, and yet we fell very quickly and easily into (if it may be said!) a rather effective organism. This was such a reminder of how natural it is for human beings to work together, that there is need of all our wits, and with willingness and a bit of urgency we can move mountains or at least shape them to our needs.

The climax of the afternoon's work was construction of a bridge near the top of the path. Here again Angus and Alan's preparations awaited us in the shape of some good-sized larch logs to span the burn, and a quantity of sawn timber for treads and hand rail. A midge poised somewhere in the air above us at this point (and there were plenty of them) might have found itself thinking about ants, but would, we hope, have been impressed by how quickly our flurried to-ings and fro-ings resulted in the completed item. This was the sort of efficiency not normally admired by time-and-motion experts – but what do they know? In a couple of hours, short bearers had been dug in either side of the burn, skilfully scalloped by Will (with power saw) so that the long logs would sit snugly down into them. Next, the larch logs were hoisted into place by teams of 5 or 6, sweating and straining maybe, but overall with remarkable ease. (It was interesting that the weaker sex featured prominently in this – maybe women have less to lose by having a go at a brawny job). Finally, a harmonious concert of many hands laid the treads, cutting them, spacing them and fixing them down, sharing hammers, passing nails, until at last we could dance with pleasure across our new-made bridge.

The only slight (and insignificant) disappointment in all of this was the non-appearance of the walkers to share our pride, but as we now know they were busy attending to their own thing.

## **SATURDAY EVENING**

### **Paths and Music**

**John Purser** is a musicologist, composer, poet, playwright and broadcaster. He is also a Gaelic speaker and scholar, and a crofter at Drinan in Skye. Introducing him, Will Boyd Wallis remembered their first meeting in Skye, where John was butchering a cow at home. He suggested that this activity, described as “barely legal”, told something of the man's attitude to life. This session was intended as a way of winding down after our outdoor activities but in the event was more of an invigorating romp. Remembering that the pictures are better on the radio, John Purser had decided not to use slides, but with poetry and song, sparkling wit and a humbling knowledge across an incredible breadth of subject matter, he led us a brisk dance through paths and music in the Gaelic culture.

He started by singing the Gaelic song “Finlay's Road”, about a path that no one had walked. This metaphor, about a man being enticed by a fairy to go whence he could never come back – was typical in Gaelic culture. Thus we are reminded that Scotland is a Gaelic country – Gaelic was spoken here for 1500 years at least and is still living in place names and culture, poetry and song, and in traces in our everyday language too. The thing about the clearances is that they are still here – evident in poetry (Sorley MacLean's “Hallaig”) and in stones on the ground.

With the attentiveness to the natural world which is characteristic of older human cultures, the paths of birds often feature in Gaelic. The space between the drying rows of freshly cut peats is



the “Birds’ Road”. There were also numerous examples in song, and we heard parts of a 9<sup>th</sup> century song about a swan (St Columba), rooted in the commingling of Scottish and Northern Irish cultures, and interestingly, traces of which turn up again in a 20<sup>th</sup> century song from Nova Scotia. There was also a perfect Gaelic imitation of a lark, wondering who has plundered her nest, and considering an appropriate level of punishment for the offender. If it were a big man he would be thrown off the cliff, but there was forgiveness for a little man – God keep him safe at home with his father and mother.

In thinking about birds, we should remember that they are reacting to things over our horizons – and perhaps ask what we can learn from them.

The most haunting and unforgettable moments of this session were hearing music played to us on two of the world’s most ancient instruments. First, the piercing liquid notes of a bone whistle made from the humerus of an eagle. Bone whistles date as far back as 35,000 years ago. The earliest in Scotland, from Skara Brae, are from 2,300 BC. Having obtained (without cruelty) the requisite bone, John had sent this to an instrument maker to be worked as a whistle. Archaeological evidence at that time showed that bone whistles had 4 finger holes, so this was what John had ordered. However the instrument maker disagreed, and followed his own instinct to produce a whistle with 6 holes. In the fullness of time, new evidence has proved him right. (So as we know, we shouldn’t judge a culture on its leavings...)

We then turned from birds to consider the long human association with cattle, and again perhaps what we might learn from them. In crofting, an ancient custom persists. Cattle are brought in for the winter and then turned out again, up onto the hill ground, in the early summer. When the cattle are released, there is always a “lead cow” amongst the herd, who will shoulder her way to the front to pick up the path that she has learned in previous years from another, older cow, and so on back into history. So these lead cows are following a path that the herd has known collectively for maybe 5000 years – and as John said, they are always ahead of you because they know where they’re going.

(Which reminded me of the poem “Bringing the Night Cow Down” by Maureen Wilkinson: [http://www.nonsuchart.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=83&Itemid=69](http://www.nonsuchart.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=83&Itemid=69)).

Bronze age humans celebrated their relationship with cattle, and the value of those animals, by casting bronze horns to play. These are highly sophisticated musical instruments, life size or larger, with maybe some simple embellishments, but producing a unique, deep sound. Played with circular breathing, the sound is a bit like the didgeridoo, but a single note is reminiscent of nothing so much as the melodious bellowing of a bull. From experience, John was able to tell us that stags feel challenged by sound of the horn. He finds cows to be the best audience, which may be easily explained! The audience at Ardtornish was rapt.

John Purser’s ability to immerse us in the community of music linked to a background preoccupation of the Paths weekend. Within different forms of language, spoken or otherwise, music is another powerful form of communication which cuts across difference and draws us back into our common understanding. This was affirmed later in the evening by the rare sight of people dancing to the bronze age horn (John Purser) and the guitar (Will Boyd Wallis).

## **SUNDAY MORNING**

### **Film and Path Thoughts – remote interview with Matt Hulse, film maker.**

Matt Hulse had been unable to attend the weekend so in lieu of having him there, we watched a short video in which he answered questions about his film, himself as a film-maker, and his attitude

to paths and walking. There was something deliciously laconic in his straight-faced attention to these questions.

About himself. He sees his role as film-maker as that of explorer, perhaps a medium.

Why was he drawn to walking and paths? He wasn't particularly. They've emerged - triggered in part maybe from remembered images of receding paths in the title sequence of a TV programme of his childhood.

If "Follow the Master" was a homage to his grandfather, was there something about walking that particular route that gave significance to that tribute? Was the metaphor of the path important? Not per se. He is interested in performance art. In the absence of scripting, he looks for other types of structure.

Does he prefer a planned walk or a random ramble? Planned. He likes framework and limitations, they let you bend rules and push boundaries.

Would he know the origin of the word "path"? No – something to do with feet maybe? (He's probably right – see dictionary, origin of path related to German *Pfad*).

Is creating specific paths (like the West Highland Way) a good thing? Maybe not – he is bothered by the commodification of exercise, the subtle pressure about what is "good for you". "Desire paths" are made by people walking.

Did the making of the film create any new paths for him? His next film, on the theme "better to start in the evening than not at all", is about deaf cyclist James Duthie who pedalled solo to the Arctic from his home in Aberdeenshire in 1951.

Last word - "better to wear out shoes than sheets" (just like Tom Clark then?)

### **Art and climate change – the work of Cape Farewell and the Scottish Islands Project Ruth Little, Associate Director**

Cape Farewell is a London-based organisation, founded in 2001 by artist David Buckland, to pioneer a cultural response to climate change by taking artists and scientists together on a 6 week sea voyage in the High Arctic. In essence, the idea is the same as the Ardtornish weekends – to capture (by invitation!) a collection of people who might not normally have all that much to do with each other (although the Ardtornish weekends may be the *Queen Mary* to Cape Farewell's 40m schooner, the *Noorderlicht*). This enforced captivity, and shared exposure to the extraordinary starkness and beauty of the Arctic, re-awakens the ancient dialogue between artist and scientist, and the art produced has the capacity to communicate on a human scale the urgency of climate change.

The Arctic shrinks you, disorients you, loses you in its scale; its indigenous populations exist within it in the simplest demonstration of our inseparability from the natural world. Its power and turbulence have a way of thwarting plans and paths. Very literally, it recalibrates the mind, and replaces the anaesthetic with the aesthetic - it is impossible to be there and not become sensitised to one's body and its context.

But there is a paradox – this environment terribly exposes the vulnerability and futility of humans and their strivings, but is itself terrifyingly fragile. Measurements of ocean salinity and temperature indicate rapid change, way ahead of scientific predictions. Cape Farewell voyagers went in search of a glacier visited 5 years previously, and were unable to find it. For the indigenous people, loss

of the ice means loss of breeding grounds for the seals and loss of hunting grounds – thus culture, diet, language and song are all melting away. And as the outside world enacts a primitive battle to carve up Arctic territories for oil and coal, those who belong there carry the most horrifying legacy of our past exploitations, elsewhere on the planet. The breast milk of Inuit mothers is now so polluted by industrial chemicals released thousands of miles away that it has been described as toxic waste. (See Marla Cone’s “Silent Snow: The slow poisoning of the Arctic”, Grove Press 2005).

This year’s voyagers will be sailing to the Scottish islands, described in a Joseph Rowntree Foundation report as bell wethers of climate change impacts across the UK. There are other metaphors too - islands are repositories of half the world’s biodiversity, archipelagos of relationships, and often, enclaves of grass roots sustainability. Cape Farewell’s objective is to shift our response to climate change from despair (saying goodbye) to hope (that we may fare well). It aims to move the dialogue of climate change from enormity, remoteness and impossibility back to local frontiers where we can develop patterns of behaviour that are responsive – and responsible.

See <http://www.capefarewell.com/> for blogs of the Scottish Islands and the Arctic expeditions.

### **Sea-paths – Flight-paths**

**Patricia and Angus Macdonald** are academics and artists passionately engaged with the environment, based in Scotland and with a long-standing connection to Ardtornish. With backgrounds in environmental science and architectural studies, and piloting their own light aircraft, the Macdonalds have been portraying and interpreting landscapes from the air, in both editorial and art-based contexts, for over 25 years. Their recent book “The Hebrides: An Aerial View of a Cultural Landscape” was published by Birlinn Ltd in 2010, and a loosely related exhibition of aerial artworks, “Edge: Hebrides”, is featured in “Portfolio: Contemporary Photography in Britain” Issue 52 (2010). Examples of images from both of these bodies of work were used in their presentation.

See <http://www.aerographica.org.uk> ; <http://www.birlinn.co.uk/book/details/Hebrides--The-9781841583150/>; and <http://www.portfoliocatalogue.com/52/index.php>.

The Macdonalds’ talk, as its title suggests, looked at some extensions of the idea of a path – paths which are not ‘a track across a land-surface’. It also drew together many threads of the weekend, offering, for example, further insights related to Ruth Little’s observation from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation that the Scottish islands are bell-wethers of rising sea levels and therefore of climate change (which is now broadly agreed to have an anthropogenic component). The close observation of the cultural landscape of the Hebrides – much of which is vulnerable and irreplaceable – therefore seems particularly pertinent in our challenging times. There were also thoughts expressed here, in both words and images, which were complementary to John Purser’s passionate exposition of Gaelic culture and music, and these enabled all present to understand the Hebrides as places of consequence which repay closer understanding in the modern world.

The Macdonalds observe, in the introduction to their book “The Hebrides”, that the position of these islands “at the edge” (considering the term in many senses) is “intense, creative, demanding, dangerous, a liminal zone – the threshold of the not-yet-known”, and that the human societies of these islands have long been characterised by an “impressive balance between enterprise, creativity, competence, patience and communitarian values” which is perhaps related to this position.

An aerial perspective of such an area leads to an intense awareness of paths other than those on land, and of how important travel on such paths has been (and still is), especially in places like the Hebrides where the world is half land, half water. A path on land is a physical object, but a sea-path is ephemeral, defined by landmarks, bearings, instruments, climate and weather. Flight-paths are

similarly but even more abstractly constituted.

A further difference between travelling by boat, on a sea-path, and walking on land has usually been the need for an appropriate group of people to work together. On land, the archetypal journey of myth or mystic tends to be an individual enterprise, but sea journeys are normally – of necessity – collaborative, communal ventures. Handling the vessel requires a crew with a range of expert knowledge and skills, as wonderfully exemplified in the renowned eighteenth-century Gaelic poem “The Birlinn of Clanranald” by *Alasdair MacMhaighstir Alasdair*/Alexander Macdonald, which describes a sea journey undertaken in a *birlinn* (a galley), from South Uist to Carrickfergus in Ireland. Aboard the *birlinn* is a collaborative community of specialists whose complementary skills are succinctly described – among them the oarsmen, the pilot, the helmsman, and the crucial “teller of the waters”, whose role is to warn the helmsman of the shape of things to come.

(I was reminded here of Jane Routh’s paraphrase in her poem “This Far”, of Macdonald’s teller of the waters as “a shrewd and timid man ... brave enough to signal caution” [www.stridemagazine.co.uk/2004/march/Routh%20poems.htm](http://www.stridemagazine.co.uk/2004/march/Routh%20poems.htm)).

Moving to a modern context, Pat and Angus had recently, as part of their work on “The Hebrides”, spent some time in Hebridean waters aboard the Northern Lighthouse Board’s tender vessel, *Pharos*, observing the expert and collaborative operations of this ship, her helicopter, and their officers, crews and artificers (who operate, together, as the lighthouse keepers of the present day, post-automation of the lights). During these voyages on board *Pharos*, the Macdonalds had ample opportunity to appreciate both the steadfast and courageous qualities of these people, and also the distinctions between the requirements of sea-paths and land-paths.

Reflecting in conclusion on what a path comprises, Pat pointed out that the journey, considered as a whole, is not simply its route and perhaps some diversions from this, but also includes a complex set of other factors (the significance of which is emphasised in the case of sea-paths and flight-paths), these being: the reason/s for the journey, without which there would be no path; the resources needed at its beginning, at its end, and sometimes along the route, by those who travel the path; and the various or communal activity involved in “providing” these resources. Vulnerability to danger is a further vital element that shapes the plan and its outcomes.

And extending her viewpoint still further, she reminded us that an important aspect of how the Earth works is the continued functioning of an essential network of many interdependent paths – not just human paths but those of other species and processes also. In closing, she referred to Michael McCarthy’s book “Say Goodbye to the Cuckoo” (John Murray 2010) which describes the dramatic recent declines in numbers of migrant birds, often celebrated as ‘the bringers of spring’, whose arrival is (in Ted Hughes’ phrase) evidence that ‘the globe is still working’. These declines are a result of the migration flight-paths of the birds being affected by a number of deleterious environmental changes brought about by human activities. Such declines are some of the current indicators – warnings – to us humans that the globe may *no longer* be working, and sharp reminders of our responsibility to reconsider much of our behaviour as a species.

## CONCLUSIONS

In the closing session the group moved together, sitting in a ring (“like a Quaker meeting”) to reflect on the weekend’s meaning, and respond to what we had heard and done. The following are some of the reflections which came through.

- Most striking was the strength of the theme - paths are crucial to all cultures, always have been, will be.
- The dichotomy between (straight) roads and (zig-zag) paths – perhaps artificial? Engineering and making things (bridges, roads, hydro schemes) can be as virtuous as poetry. In Scots, poets are *makars*. In post-revolutionary France, writers insisted that poetry and science were the same thing – sharing structural intuitions about the universe and how it works. It’s important to avoid a sense of binary opposition – the question is not art or science. It takes a poet to know what it needs a scientist to prove.
- Art extends ideas into the community, into the long conversation of culture. We need to retain a sense of the continuity of time, “slow time”, in the urgency of our sense of crisis. (See Brian Eno’s essay “The Big Here and the Long Now” <http://longnow.org/essays/big-here-and-long-now/>).
- Thinking of the webs of relationships that cannot be broken (lost cuckoos, lost languages, melting ice), all the weekend’s disparate viewpoints and observations were strands to the theme. Like the crew of the *birlinn*, the strengths each brings are necessary to the strength of the whole.
- Web and network are descriptive of how paths work – developing the reticulum of all our paths on the planet, not just goal or super-highway, not just north/south orientated. And being mindful of the spectres of old paths buried beneath. (Broadway, winding through the imposition of Manhattan’s grid, is the oldest street there – the original Indian trail to the hunting grounds. And Tom Clark’s line from “On Paths” – *The patience of untrodden paths is limited*).
- The “net” allows virtual engagement with people and places all over the world – could liberate us from burning up the planet to go and see what it’s like on the other side. (Yes, but embodied knowledge is vital too – can’t build a virtual bridge).
- The terrible anxiety about the relationship between local and global – powerlessness of the Inuit woman against what comes to her from other continents – our powerlessness in this too.
- Attentiveness to this (anxiety) – heeding what we get from our senses versus the anaesthesia of being bubble-wrapped in our industrial culture. Danger of anaesthesia also from hearing and fearing too much about crisis (like climate change) – although crisis is a huge chance to force change, start a new conversation.
- Pessimism about democracy’s potential to respond to what we need - local responses are better. How do we de-anaesthetise, connect our potential for attentiveness to real experience? Colliding artists and scientists is one way, taking more people to hear nightingales, more children for walks, adapting the model of this weekend in many different contexts.
- The physical experience of the weekend (walking and path-building) was its transforming element - creating a sense of optimism for the capacity of human beings to work towards common purpose. People can build bridges, quickly and without rehearsal.

For the Trust, the weekend offered numerous reflections and insights about its own future path. Having “wandered wonderingly” into this theme (engendering some trepidation?), it had turned out to be one of the richest. Why was this so?

For a start, the scope of the theme (described more than once as “nebulous”) was uniquely liberating to the discussions. Unlike previous years, we weren’t so much focussing on a topic as dispersed within one. Yet it did impose its own (different) discipline. Because of its universality, paths was a theme personal to each of us yet common to us all. Like a fractal, this was boundless

terrain within which we were all at home in our own patches but could therefore recognise each other's. Traversing and sharing our understandings of this terrain we needed different languages, and translations. (Translating – moving sideways, seeing same things from different place).

So what had seemed a slightly unlikely programme of poetry and path-building engendered a conversation that was visceral as well as verbal, physical and practical as well as imaginative, and communal as well as individual. A final thought is that perhaps these weekends, and this one in particular, are a way of reminding us that we are a clan species. We have more than a planet in common – being in groups does important and ancient things to us, it's inspiring, empowering and affirming. Like the Clan Ranald in their *birlinn*, we work well together, we may do best in smallish vessels, and will often pull off our greatest feats in adversity.