

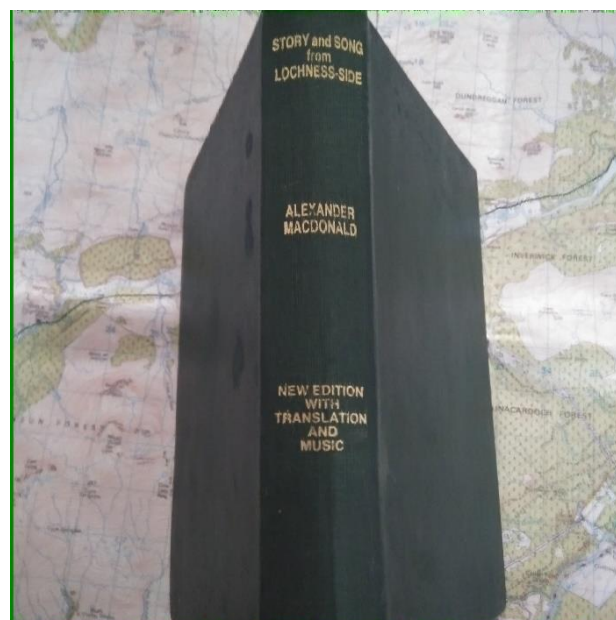
The Glen of the Bards/ Gleann nam Bàrd

By Joyce Brìghde Gilbert (Project Manager) on behalf of

The Fort Augustus & Area Gaelic Group and the Glenmoriston Improvement Group

Background

Glenmoriston has a rich tradition of local bards. Their poems and songs tell the story of a changing way of life: from shielings and drovers to the introduction of sheep and the clearances, to the rise of sporting estates. Alexander Macdonald from Achnaconeran in Glenmoriston is one of these bards. He came from a culturally rich family with a strong interest in both collecting and writing Gaelic poetry and song. Throughout his life he collected material from the Glenmoriston and Loch Ness-side area, some of which was published in his 1914 book, *'Story and Song from Loch Ness-side'*. He also wrote extensively for a variety of newspapers, periodicals and cultural organisations and over a 35-year period right up to his death in 1928 "barely a week went by where he didn't have an article published". Yet almost 100 years later his work had been largely forgotten.

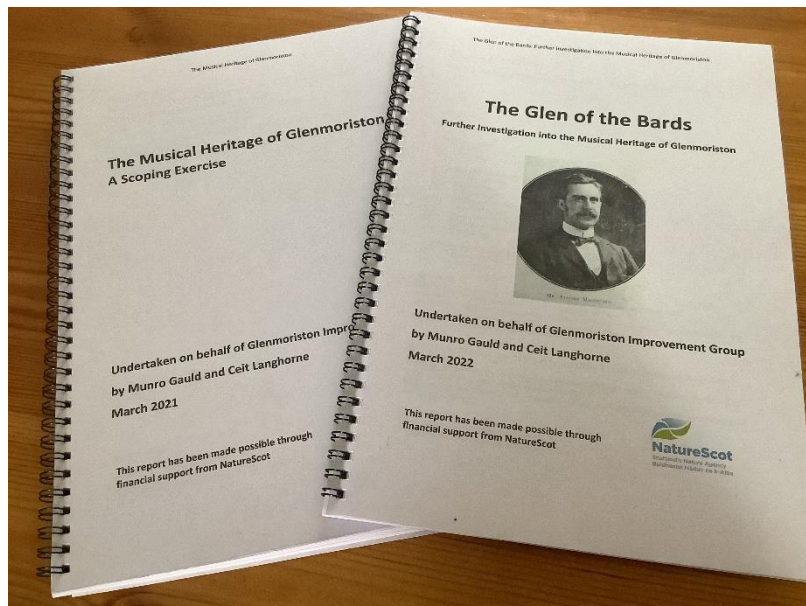


When I arrived in Glenmoriston eight years ago, I came across a copy of *'Story and Song from Loch Ness-side'* in Leakey's bookshop in Inverness. Little did I know that this chance find would lead to an exciting project about the musical heritage of Glenmoriston. At the time, I could immediately see that it was a treasure trove of information. However, I lost the

thread every few pages because it is partially written in Gaelic. I was sufficiently intrigued to sign up for an online Gaelic course with **Sabhal Mòr Ostaig** in 2018. In autumn 2019, I took the plunge and enrolled in their residential immersion year at the college on Skye. This included a module about Gaelic poetry and the bardic tradition. Suddenly 'Story and Song' started to make sense and I knew I needed to delve a bit deeper.

The Research

During 2021, Ceit Langhorne (Gaelic singer/storyteller) and Munro Gauld (traditional musician) undertook research on behalf of the Glenmoriston Improvement Group. With financial support from **NatureScot**, they uncovered over 300 local songs, which would have originally been shared in people's homes (Taigh Ciùil). Some of these are beautiful nature praise poems. Ceit and Munro produced a superb report which can be found on the Glenmoriston Community website www.glenmoriston.net. A further piece of research was commissioned in January 2022, when it was discovered that the **National Library of Scotland** held a large archive of material written and collected by Alexander Macdonald throughout his lifetime. The linked report (written by Ceit Langhorne and Munro Gauld) has recently been completed and will be available on the community website soon.



Project Research Reports

Looking for Gaelic Song-lines

During spring and summer 2021 (much of this in Lockdown), I started to explore places mentioned in the songs and shared a regular blog on the community Facebook page. The aim was to introduce local people to the project and at the same time use conversations on the threads to gather more information. We were amazed to see how perfectly the songs mapped places in the glen – it was like a Gaelic Song-Line. The yellow dots show where the bards lived, and the red dots are the places the sang about. These songs give us a snapshot of everyday life in Glenmoriston 200-300 years ago. It is the story of our glen...



Mapping the songs

Bringing the music to life

In August 2021, professional fiddler Charlie Grey (Fort Augustus), and cittern player Neil Baillie (Aberfeldy) joined the ***Glen of the Bards*** project team. Many of the poems didn't have accompanying music or the music was in Solfa notation. This method of transcribing notes was popular in Victorian times but doesn't give much information about how a song or tune might sound. It meant that there a lot of skilled detective work and playing together was required - to match the words to the music and to get a feel for how it might have sounded.

Over the following six months the team worked closely together to interpret the music. Finally in May 2022, we were able to bring some of these Gaelic songs and tunes back to the community after a gap of perhaps 100 years.

Community events

Bilingual events were held in Invermoriston, Fort Augustus and Dalchreichart, which were attended by around 100 people. Ten songs or pieces of music from the collection were shared. This included ...

1. Coir' Iarairidh by Ewen MacDonald. Song in praise of the natural beauty of Coire Iarairidh. Places: Coire Iarairidh, Sròn na Mhuice, Ruigh'-Uiseig.
2. Airidh nam Badan (The shieling of the thicket) – Fiddle jig (Anon)
3. Ho ro na geamaran (Ho ro the gamekeepers), Anon. Song bemoaning the advent of the shooting estates and gamekeepers. Places: The Craach
4. Oran do Seilge (Song of the hunt) by Archie Tailleir. Detailed account of a hunt in his youth in Coire Dhò with James Murray Grant. Places: Coire Dhò, Carn Ghluasaid, Slochd Ruairidh, Fhiudhaich, Coire Sgreamh, Coire-Mheadhoin, Tigh Mòr na Seilge, Bealach an Amais, Cloich Ghlaise.
5. Ged a gheabhain by Domhnall Donn. Song lamenting the composer's capture and subsequent imprisonment in Inverness. Places: The caves on Allt Saigh
6. Na 'n tigeadh an Samhradh (If summer comes) by Domhull DONN. Places: The Red Craig or Donald's Cave.
7. Tha mi air mo chur, ho-ri (I am exhausted, ho-ri) (Anon). Herding song bemoaning life on the hill looking after cattle. Places: Sron a Mhuice
8. Tha buaidh air an uisge bheatha (There is goodness in whisky). Anon. Song in praise of whisky. Places: Sron a Mhuice.
9. Gleannamoireasdain by Alexander Macdonald. Lyrical, ceilidh-song in praise of his home glen. Places: Lundie, Allt Saigh.
10. Sacred Song by John Grant

During the interval people attending the event were able to look at the song map and important project sources/resources, plus of course the two research reports funded by **NatureScot**. There was also a chance for them to chat to the musicians and other people over a cup of tea. We were delighted to hear Gaelic conversations taking place at every venue – perhaps the first time this has happened for many years in the glen. Gaelic speakers/ambassadors shared some feedback by email on Facebook threads.

'Chord e rium gun robh uimhir a Ghàidhlig ann. Tha mòran bruidhinn air craobhan is lus an a bhuineas do dùthaich a thoirt air ais ac seach sibh fhèin, chan eil gu leòr ann air a' chanain a thoirt air ais. Is math a rinn sibh!'

'I liked the fact there was so much Gaelic being spoken at the event. There's a lot of talk about restoring native trees and plants but, apart from you(pl), there is not enough to bring the language back. Well done!' Iain Macillechair (Gaelic Society of Inverness)

‘Saoilidh mi gun robh an tachartas air leth math ann an trè dòighean. Bhrosnaich e cleachdadh na Gàidhlig, agus èisteachd rithe, ann an suidheachadh tlachdmhor, neo-fhoirmeil. Bha gu leòr an làthair a bha a’ cabadaich le chèile anns a’ chànan agus thug sin buaidh air na daoine aig nach robh i, chanainn. Bhrosnaich e luchd-ionnsachaidh gus beagan Gàidhlig feuchainn. Agus an treas rud, thaisbean e cho beartach ‘s a tha dualchas na Gàidhlig anns an sgìre sin.’

*‘I think the event was great in three ways. It encouraged the use of Gaelic and listening to it in a pleasant, informal setting. There were a lot of people present who chatted in the language and that affected the people who didn’t speak it, I would say. It encouraged learners to try out some Gaelic. And thirdly it showed how rich the Gaelic culture is Glenmoriston.’ **Ruaraidh MacIleathain (Roddy Maclean, Writer & Broadcaster)***



Our first event at the Glen Rowan Café, Invermoriston



Event in Fort Augustus Village Hall



West Glenmoriston Community Hub, Dalchreichart



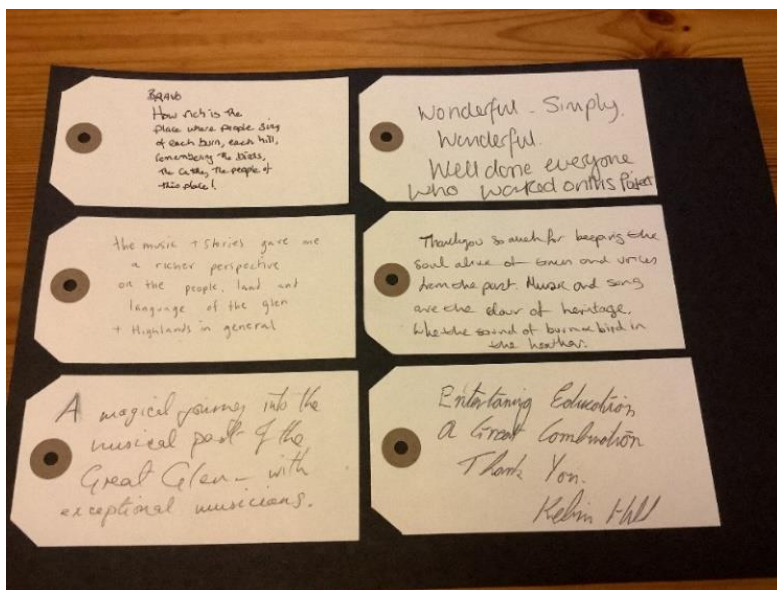
Exploring project resources and the song map at Fort Augustus



Exploring project resources and the song map at Dalchreichart

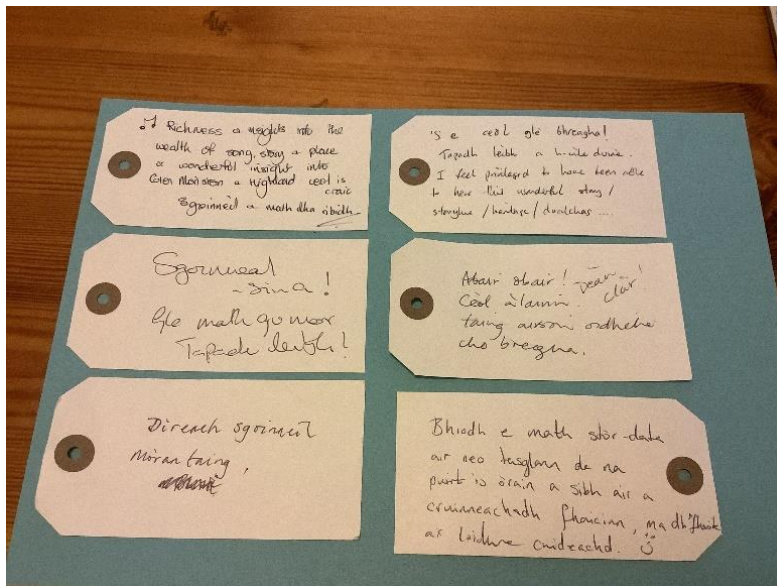
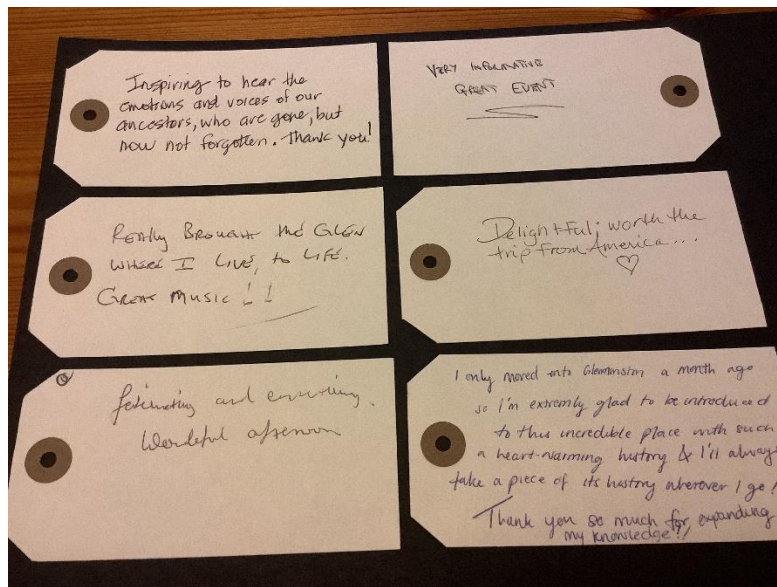


Attendees were asked to write a response to hang on our tree



A selection of the 60 responses, which were in Gaelic and English.

In 30 years of designing and managing heritage projects, I've never seen so many heartfelt, often poetic responses/evaluations (in English and Gaelic). It has profoundly affected the project team too – especially Charlie whose family go back several generations in this area. He didn't know that there was any music written about 'his place'. Quite extraordinary.



High quality sound recordings were made at the West Glenmoriston Hub. Funded by **Bòrd na Gàidhlig** and **The Highland Council**, these will be shared on the community website and will be used in the next phase of the project, planned for 2022/23



Sound Engineer Dave Macfarlane in his pop-up 'sound studio' at Dalchreichart



Sound recording in the West Glenmoriston Hub, Dalchreichart

Trees for Life (TfL) lent their regular film-maker (Chris Coutts) for a day. He interviewed the project team about their experiences of the project, recorded rehearsals and filmed the full performance at Fort Augustus. Over the coming weeks, Chris will be making a high-quality film to be shared on the community website and in the Rewilding Centre currently under construction at Dundreggan in Glenmoriston. With Gaelic at its heart, The Rewilding Centre

is scheduled to open in March 2023 and will attract 70,000 people per year. This will increase 'the reach' of the community-led project locally, nationally and internationally.



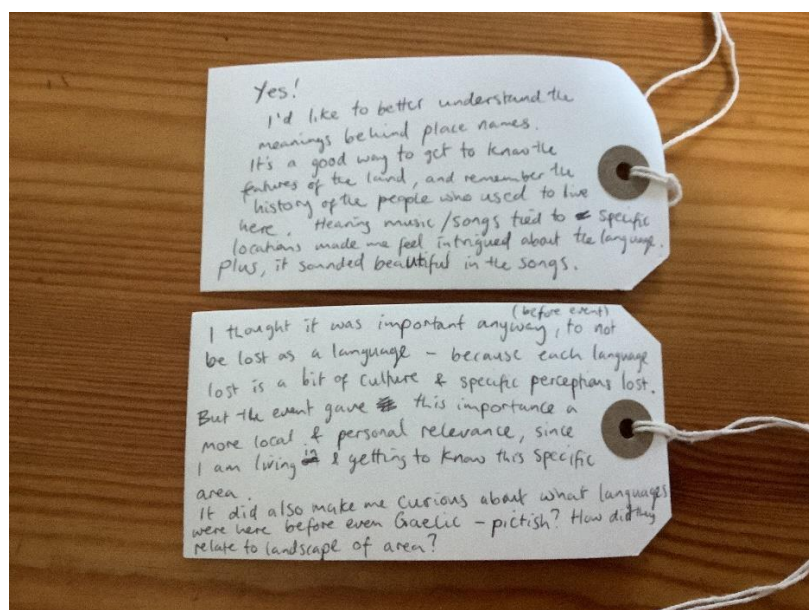
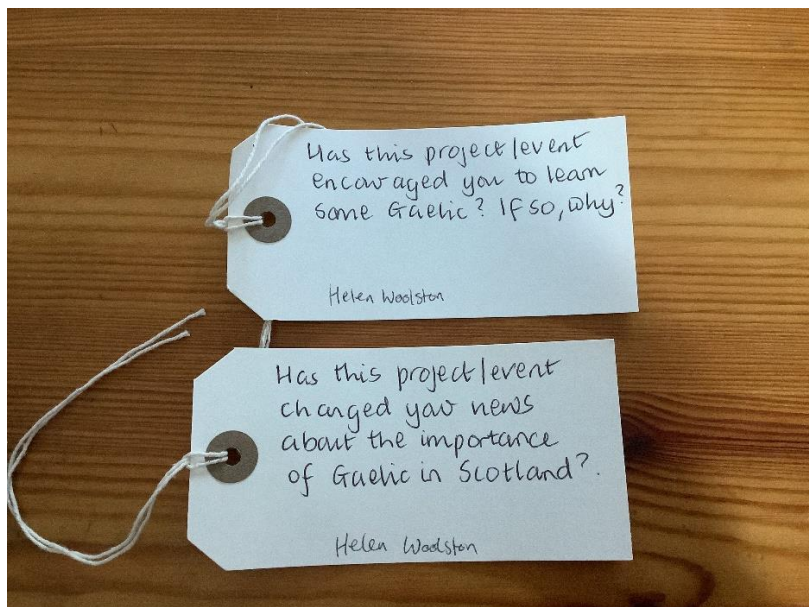
Chris Coutts interviewing researchers (Ceit Langhorne and Munro Gauld)



Chris Coutts filming at the rehearsal in Fort Augustus

Next Steps

In the short term, we are assessing the success of the project on the evaluations described above. However, we have already started to ask people if the event has changed their attitudes towards Gaelic and if they would consider taking Gaelic classes. We are also asking those who have a little Gaelic if they feel more confident about speaking. We will continue to collect this information over the coming weeks and months. This will feed into planning for next steps – an important part of an initiative which we don't consider to be a 'one off', but as a journey to help local people to engage with and value local cultural heritage including Gaelic.



Funding permitting, we are planning to interview people in the glen who have a particular connection to the place. These individuals may have lived in Glenmoriston for some 50 years or more. They may have family connections in Glenmoriston going back a few generations. They may have some Gaelic or have memories of people in the glen who spoke it in the past. As part of this initiative, we will identify other Gaelic speakers in the glen including those who have been taking part in the Beginner and Intermediate classes which are funded as part **The Glen of the Bards** initiative. These individuals will be at different levels of fluency, and we hope to determine how, if at all, Gaelic allows them to relate to place and environment in Glenmoriston.

When the film is launched and shared, this will give us another opportunity to revisit the project and touch base with local people. We are also in discussion with local schools about offering a linked schools project – possibly in the autumn. **The Scottish Storytelling Centre** has been approached to see if they would like to include **Glen of the Bards** as part of the **Scottish International Festival of Storytelling** – with performances in Edinburgh and locally – perhaps Invergarry to link with the school project. Discussions are also taking place with **Glengarry Community Woodland** about linking **The Glen of the Bards** to a new style Fèis which would have a focus on nature and be outdoors as much as possible.

