



MODERN SCOT

Distinctly Scottish



ISSUE 10

13 AUGUST 2026

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POLICY AND GOVERNMENT | 13 August 2026

New Safety Guidance Issued for Nearly 500,000 Traditional Scottish Buildings

Read online: <https://modern.scot/new-safety-guidance-issued-for-nearly-500000-traditional-scottish-buildings/>



The first major guidance of its kind in almost two decades follows lessons from the fatal Cameron House Hotel fire.

New guidance has been published on converting Scotland's traditional buildings after concerns about fire safety, hidden structural features and the challenges of adapting older properties.

The Scottish Government says almost half a million traditional buildings could be covered by the guidance.

The Guide to Conversion of Traditional Buildings deals with fire safety, accessibility and energy efficiency while encouraging the reuse of existing structures rather than their demolition.

It is the first guidance of its kind in almost 20 years.

Its publication forms part of the response to lessons identified following the fatal fire at Cameron House Hotel on Loch Lomond in 2017.

Older buildings can contain features which are poorly documented or invisible during normal occupation, including concealed voids capable of allowing fire and smoke to spread.

Conversions can also introduce new risks when historic structures are altered for uses very different from those for which they were originally built.

Public Finance Minister Hannah Mary Goodlad said the guidance was intended to make sure those undertaking conversions understood such risks while finding ways to preserve historic buildings.

Historic Environment Scotland said adaptation could allow culturally important buildings to remain in use while contributing to regeneration and local economies.

The issue is particularly relevant to Scotland's towns and cities, where substantial banks, schools, warehouses, churches, offices and houses have survived long after their original purpose has disappeared.

Reuse can provide an alternative to demolition and new construction, but historic buildings can be difficult to reconcile with modern standards for insulation, accessibility and fire protection.

Poorly considered interventions may damage original fabric without necessarily producing an efficient or safe building.

The new guidance seeks to address that tension by encouraging an assessment of the individual structure rather than treating traditional construction as though it were the same as a modern building.

The Scottish Government has also introduced legislation known as Simon and Richard's Law, named in honour

of victims of the Cameron House fire.

Following its passage by Parliament, sprinkler systems became mandatory in traditional buildings newly converted into hotels.

The broader challenge now is implementation.

Guidance can establish better standards and make building owners aware of hidden risks, but much of Scotland's traditional building stock requires substantial investment simply to remain in good repair.

Preserving the country's architectural inheritance will depend on whether safe conversion is also financially practical for owners, developers and communities.

ENERGY | 13 August 2026

Community Renewable Energy Fund Increased to £15m a Year

Read online: <https://modern.scot/community-renewable-energy-fund-increased-to-15m-a-year/>



Scottish community groups are being offered more financial support to own renewable energy projects and reduce the running costs of local buildings.

Funding available for community-owned renewable energy projects in Scotland is to increase to £15m a year.

The Scottish Government said the additional money would be made available through the Community and Renewable Energy Scheme, known as CARES.

The programme provides grants, loans and advice for

projects including community-owned wind and solar generation, heat decarbonisation and improvements to the energy efficiency of community buildings.

More than £83m has previously been distributed through CARES, supporting more than 1,200 projects with a combined renewable generation capacity of about 75MW.

The Scottish Government funding will also be supplemented by £2m a year from the National Lottery Community Fund.

First Minister John Swinney announced the increase before visiting Scalpay Community Centre in the Western Isles.

The centre previously used CARES support to install solar photovoltaic panels, battery storage and a heat pump.

The policy has a different emphasis from conventional community-benefit payments associated with large commercial renewable developments.

Rather than communities receiving compensation or grants for hosting infrastructure owned elsewhere, CARES is designed to allow local organisations to own or directly benefit from generation and energy assets themselves.

The Scottish Government said it would also refresh guidance for public bodies to encourage them to make public land and buildings available for community renewable projects.

Work is additionally taking place to assess whether solar generation could be installed in underused spaces.

The distinction between hosting and owning renewable energy infrastructure has become increasingly relevant as Scotland expands wind, solar, transmission and other energy projects.

Large developments may generate wider national or commercial value while the communities in which they

are situated experience the immediate effects of construction and infrastructure.

Community ownership offers a different model, allowing some of the financial return and reduced energy costs to remain locally.

Its scale remains comparatively modest. The 75MW of capacity supported by CARES is small beside Scotland's commercial generation fleet.

The programme nevertheless provides a route for community halls, development trusts and other local organisations to reduce their exposure to energy costs and, in some cases, generate income.

The increase to £15m will therefore be most meaningful if it translates into completed projects with durable local ownership, rather than simply a larger pool of applications.

POLICY AND GOVERNMENT | 13 August 2026

£1.5m announced to support Gaelic in designated communities

Read online: <https://modern.scot/1-5m-announced-to-support-gaelic-in-designated-communities/>



The funding was announced as the second phase of the Cnoc Soilleir Gaelic cultural and education centre opened in South Uist.

Scottish councils establishing designated areas of importance to the Gaelic language are to receive a share of £1.5m in new government funding.

The money will be available to selected local authorities working to establish Areas of Linguistic Significance, with councils expected to use it to promote Gaelic language and culture in ways suited to their

communities.

The announcement was made as First Minister John Swinney officially opened the second phase of Cnoc Soilleir in South Uist.

The centre brings together Ceòlas Uibhist and UHI North, West and Hebrides and provides space for Gaelic education, music, dance, concerts, ceilidhs, conferences and community events.

The Scottish Government says it has provided £7.6m towards Cnoc Soilleir since 2017.

The centre has been developed over more than two decades and is intended to serve both local communities and the wider Gaelic cultural sector.

The new £1.5m local authority fund is potentially more significant than the ceremonial opening because it moves Gaelic policy towards geographically targeted intervention.

Areas of Linguistic Significance are intended to recognise places where Gaelic has a particular cultural and community presence and where additional measures may help sustain its everyday use.

Gaelic policy has long faced a difficulty familiar to endangered and minority languages: institutional recognition does not automatically produce regular use within homes, workplaces or communities.

Investment in education, arts and signage can strengthen the public presence of a language, but long-term survival also depends on whether younger generations have reasons and opportunities to use it in ordinary life.

This is particularly acute in island communities where Gaelic remains culturally strong but where depopulation, housing pressures and the movement of younger residents can alter the linguistic character of settlements.

The Scottish Government said the new funding would allow councils to develop approaches suited to their own areas rather than impose a single national model.

No detailed breakdown of how the £1.5m will be divided between individual authorities was contained in the

announcement.

That will be an important measure of the programme when allocations are known.

For South Uist, meanwhile, the opening of Cnoc Soilleir provides a substantial permanent venue in which education, cultural activity and community life can operate through Gaelic rather than treating the language solely as an object of preservation.

COMMUNITY | 13 August 2026

More than 8,800 households waiting for social housing in Highland

Read online: <https://modern.scot/more-than-8800-households-waiting-for-social-housing-in-highland/>



Demand continues to outstrip the availability of homes across much of the Highlands, with Inverness accounting for a particularly large share of applications.

More than 8,800 households are registered for social housing in Highland, with the supply of available homes continuing to fall short of demand in many parts of the region.

Highland Council's annual review of its housing register found that 8,826 households were waiting for housing or seeking a transfer during 2025-26.

The pressure is particularly concentrated in Inverness.

About 42% of applicants named Inverness as their first choice of location, while only 29% of available properties were in the city.

The figures illustrate one of the central difficulties facing Highland housing policy: the issue is not solely the total number of houses, but whether homes of the right size and tenure exist in the places where people need them.

Half of the applicants on the Highland Housing Register are single people, adding to demand for smaller properties.

During 2025-26, 1,592 households secured a tenancy through the register. More than half of all properties allocated — 891 homes, or 56% — went to households experiencing homelessness. That proportion was four percentage points higher than in the previous year.

About one in five households receiving a home had health-related housing needs, while almost one in five had previously been living in overcrowded accommodation.

The council said 13 households, including people with complex health and support needs, moved into their first independent tenancies. Fourteen care-experienced young people were housed through the Highland Protocol, while 23 serving or former members of the Armed Forces also secured homes.

The pressure has persisted despite additional housing construction. Earlier council papers showed the number of register applications had risen from 8,767 at the end of March 2025 to 8,826 a year later.

They also recorded 880 house completions across all tenures during 2025-26, down from 1,000 in the previous year. Of those, 499 were affordable housing completions.

Housing shortages in Highland carry consequences beyond individual applicants. Employers in some areas have

struggled with the availability of accommodation for workers, while high prices, private rents and the geography of the region can leave households with few realistic alternatives.

Highland Council said it would continue working with housing associations, developers and landowners to increase affordable housing, return empty homes to use and expand the housing stock.

The council is also reviewing its allocations policy.

The latest figures show, however, that new housing will have to do more than increase the regional total. With more than four in ten applicants seeking Inverness as their preferred location, the geographical mismatch between demand and supply remains one of the more difficult parts of the Highland housing problem.

ECONOMY | 13 August 2026

Scotland revenues reach £98.3bn as fiscal deficit narrows

Read online: <https://modern.scot/scotland-revenues-reach-98-3bn-as-fiscal-deficit-narrows/>



Government revenues attributed to Scotland rose by £6.3bn in 2025-26, while the gap between estimated public spending and revenue narrowed to £25.3bn.

Government revenues attributed to Scotland reached a record £98.3bn in 2025-26, according to the latest Government Expenditure and Revenue Scotland figures.

The total was £6.3bn, or 6.9%, higher than the previous year. Public spending attributed to Scotland also increased, but at a slower rate, rising by £5.7bn to £123.6bn.

The result was a notional net fiscal deficit of £25.3bn, down by £600m over the year. The deficit was equivalent to 10.9% of Scottish gross domestic product, compared with 4.2% for the UK as a whole. Scotland's percentage improved by 0.6 percentage points during the year.

GERS is an accredited official statistics publication which estimates both the revenue raised in Scotland and public spending undertaken for the benefit of people in Scotland. It includes spending and revenues controlled by both the Scottish and UK governments.

Revenue per person, including Scotland's geographical share of North Sea receipts, was £17,718, almost identical to the UK average of £17,720.

Spending per person was substantially higher. The figures put Scottish public expenditure at £22,281 per person, £2,720 above the UK average of £19,561.

Among the largest changes was a £2.4bn increase in National Insurance contributions, following the UK Government's increase in employer contributions from April 2025. Income tax receipts rose by £1.5bn.

The statistics said the income tax increase also reflected Scottish tax decisions, continuing effects from inflation and growth in nominal earnings.

Devolved revenues, which include Scottish Income Tax, Council Tax, non-domestic rates, Land and Buildings Transaction Tax and Scottish Landfill Tax, generated £27.8bn. That was £2.1bn, or 8.2%, higher than a year earlier.

North Sea revenues moved in the opposite direction. They fell by £400m to £3.2bn as oil and gas prices declined.

The largest increases in spending were in social protection, up £2.1bn, and health, up £1.5bn.

Deputy First Minister and Finance Secretary Jenny Gilruth said the figures showed revenues growing more quickly than spending and pointed in particular to higher income tax receipts.

The figures are likely to be interpreted differently across Scotland's constitutional debate. The Scottish Government stresses that GERS describes Scotland's finances within the existing UK system and is not a forecast of the finances of an independent state. Equally, the figures show that under current arrangements considerably more public expenditure is attributed to Scotland than revenue is estimated to be raised there.

The most notable movement in this year's figures is therefore not the disappearance of the fiscal gap, but its modest narrowing alongside strong revenue growth.

ECONOMY | 13 August 2026

A Country Without Tellers: How Scotland Lost Its Banks

Read online: <https://modern.scot/a-country-without-tellers-how-scotland-lost-its-banks/>



In little more than a decade, Scotland has watched a familiar piece of civic life disappear from hundreds of communities. The story begins with quiet rationalisation, passes through mass closures and parliamentary revolt, and ends (for now) with a new experiment in shared banking.

Modern Scot investigation | 13 August 2026

There is a particular irony in Scotland losing its banks.

This is a country that helped teach the modern world how to bank.

Bank of Scotland was created by Act of the Scottish Parliament in 1695, when credit was scarce and merchants needed a financial system capable of supporting trade and industry. What followed was one of the most distinctive banking cultures in Europe: competing Scottish banks, their own notes, extensive branch networks and financial innovations that would be

studied far beyond Scotland.

For generations, the bank became part of the architecture of Scottish life.

Which makes what happened next all the more remarkable.

There is a building somewhere in Scotland that still looks exactly like a bank.

It may be sandstone, built with the confidence of another century. There will be steps worn smooth by generations of customers, tall windows and a doorway deliberately designed to look solid. Banks once built premises to advertise permanence before anyone had coined the phrase “brand identity”.

The lettering has gone now.

Perhaps it is a restaurant. Perhaps a charity shop. Perhaps flats. Perhaps the windows have simply been papered over and the old banking hall sits empty behind them.

What happened inside that building has been repeated across Scotland on an extraordinary scale.

For generations, the bank branch was an ordinary piece of Scottish infrastructure. It sat beside the chemist, the butcher, the post office and the council building. Farmers used it. Shopkeepers carried their takings through its doors. Older customers knew the staff. Young people opened their first accounts there. Executors appeared with death certificates. Families arranged mortgages. Businesses borrowed money.

Then, beginning quietly and accelerating with remarkable speed, the branches began to go.

What looked at first like corporate tidying became something much larger: a retreat from the Scottish high street that has changed the financial geography of the country.



Kyle of Lochalsh — Bank of Scotland The former Bank of Scotland at Kyle of Lochalsh, its white-painted walls, sandstone dressings and turreted bays giving the branch the appearance of a small civic institution rather than an ordinary shopfront. The bank has gone; the building remains. Photograph: Bill Harrison / Geograph, CC BY-SA 2.0.

The Initial Cuts

The modern story begins around 2015.

There was no single morning on which Scotland was informed that its branch-banking system was about to be dismantled. Instead there were announcements from individual institutions, usually presented in the language of efficiency, changing customer behaviour and declining footfall.

The argument was not fictitious. Banking really was changing.

Smartphones were becoming financial instruments. Customers who once visited a branch to check balances, transfer money or pay bills could increasingly do all three while sitting at the kitchen table. Debit cards and contactless payments were reducing some uses of cash. Banks could see transactions migrating online.

The response was incremental.

A branch serving one part of Edinburgh disappeared. Another in Glasgow followed. Duplicate premises were consolidated. Smaller branches with falling traffic became vulnerable.

The difficulty with the early period is that these closures were scattered through corporate announcements, local newspaper reports and records that were never designed to become a permanent national archive.

Some branches have proved surprisingly difficult to reconstruct only eleven years later.

Among the institutions disappearing during this period was something more unusual: Airdrie Savings Bank, founded in 1835 and for generations one of Scotland's last independent savings banks. Its eventual closure in 2017 was different in character from an individual branch rationalisation. An entire Scottish banking institution disappeared.

By then the gentle language of adjustment was becoming difficult to reconcile with the scale of what followed.

2017: The Cull Becomes Visible

If the first phase could be understood as rationalisation, 2017 made the national pattern impossible to miss.

Clydesdale Bank announced a programme involving 40 Scottish branches, stretching across cities, commuter

towns and rural communities. Modern Scot's reconstructed records include places such as Banff, Bathgate, Bearsden, Beith, Bellshill, Brechin and Buckie.

Dalkeith, Dunoon, East Kilbride, Edinburgh Leith Walk and even an Edinburgh University branch were among the same programme.

Royal Bank of Scotland then announced the planned closure of 62 Scottish branches, saying branch transactions had fallen by around 40 per cent in three years as customers changed the way they banked.

This was something different.

A network assembled over generations could now be reduced through national programmes decided in months.

The effects were particularly stark in northern Scotland. Communities in Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross had distances that looked modest in a boardroom presentation and rather less modest when driven in winter.

Banks saw falling transactions.

Communities saw the removal of buildings, staff, cash facilities, business services and accumulated local knowledge.

Both descriptions could be true at the same time.



Oban — former Clydesdale Bank The former Clydesdale Bank in Oban, completed in 1915 to designs by Glasgow architects Baird & Thomson. The bank later moved elsewhere and the Category C-listed red-sandstone building became a coffee shop — one of many Scottish banking halls to outlive the institutions that commissioned them. Photograph: The Carlisle Kid / Geograph, CC BY-SA 2.0.

Westminster Notices

By 2018 the dispute had reached Parliament.

The House of Commons Scottish Affairs Committee opened an inquiry into RBS's programme of Scottish closures and took evidence from senior executives, unions, rural organisations and the Post Office.

The political argument was unusually revealing.

RBS maintained that customers were moving towards digital services and that maintaining poorly used premises could not be justified indefinitely. Opponents argued that national averages concealed the conditions faced by rural communities, older customers, small businesses and people who did not have reliable digital alternatives.

The committee's intervention eventually led to pressure on RBS to reconsider part of the programme. Ten branches received temporary reprieves while the bank reviewed their future.

But the wider retreat continued.

By March 2019, the Scottish Affairs Committee was referring to 399 branch closures in Scotland since 2015, largely involving RBS, Bank of Scotland and Clydesdale Bank.

Four years had been enough to alter the country's banking landscape.

The argument over the closures also established a principle that has largely survived ever since: governments could scrutinise, cajole and regulate the consequences, but banks remained commercial institutions making decisions about their own branch estates.

That distinction would become increasingly important.

The Rural Quarantine

A closed bank means something different in Portree than it does in central Glasgow.

That is the point at which national statistics begin to conceal more than they reveal.

In densely populated areas another branch may be a bus journey away. In rural Scotland, a closure can move banking into another town, another county or, in island communities, across water.

When the Scottish Affairs Committee examined access to cash in 2022, it heard that the nearest alternative Virgin Money branch for customers affected by the Portree closure was 80 miles away and involved a ferry transfer.

For customers of the closed Wick branch, the nearest alternative was said to be 101 miles away.

Those distances alter the economics of ordinary banking.

A shopkeeper cannot put a week's cash takings into an app.

Neither can a hotel, pub, café, market trader or community organisation.

Cash has to be stored securely until somebody physically takes it somewhere. What appears on a corporate spreadsheet as the elimination of an underused branch can therefore transfer time, mileage, risk and cost directly to customers.

The consequences are not confined to businesses.

Parliament's 2022 investigation estimated that around 500,000 people in Scotland remained reliant on cash, while warning about the particular effects of continuing branch and ATM reductions on vulnerable people and those in isolated or rural locations.

Digital banking solved an enormous number of problems.

It did not abolish geography.



Beith — former Clydesdale Bank The former Clydesdale Bank in Beith, built in Mauchline red sandstone in 1906 and now Category B listed. Its corner tower and elaborate frontage were designed for an age when a bank building was expected to communicate security and permanence. The branch closed in 2017. Photograph: Richard Sutcliffe / Geograph, CC BY-SA 2.0.

The Pandemic Accelerator

Then came 2020.

The movement towards online banking was well established before COVID-19. It would be inaccurate to claim that the pandemic created the closure programme.

What it did was accelerate behaviour already moving in that direction.

Branches temporarily closed or operated under restrictions. Customers who had never intended to become digital bankers suddenly had a powerful reason to learn. Contactless payments became ordinary even among people who had previously preferred cash.

Some of that behaviour persisted.

The result arrived at exactly the point when banks were already reconsidering the economics of their estates.

Santander, TSB, Virgin Money and others continued substantial closure programmes through the pandemic period and its aftermath. Modern Scot's records include Santander branches at Dalkeith, Edinburgh Morningside Road, Glasgow Kilmarnock Road and Glasgow Sauchiehall Street among the 2021 closures.

The Financial Conduct Authority became sufficiently concerned about the conditions surrounding closure decisions that it developed increasingly formal expectations about how banks should assess their effects on customers.

The important distinction, however, remained.

Regulation could make the process more responsible.

It could not make the old branch network return.

The Post Office Patchwork

As branches disappeared, one institution increasingly appeared in banks' explanations of what customers should do next.

The Post Office.

The arrangement made sense. Britain already had a large network of Post Office counters, many in communities where bank branches were disappearing. Through agreements with the banks, customers could carry out basic transactions including depositing and withdrawing cash, paying in cheques and checking balances.

For many communities, that service has been indispensable.

But a Post Office counter and a bank branch are not interchangeable institutions.

The Post Office can handle many routine transactions. It cannot make every banking decision, resolve every account problem or reproduce the full range of specialist services that once existed behind the doors of a conventional branch.

There are practical limits too. Cash deposit limits, for example, are set by individual banks rather than by the Post Office.

For a small personal transaction this may be unremarkable.

For businesses handling cash, the difference becomes more consequential.

The Post Office therefore became the patch applied to a shrinking branch system — an extraordinarily useful patch, but a patch nevertheless.

Then a different model began to appear.

The Shared Bank Arrives

The Banking Hub is perhaps the most interesting admission contained within the entire bank-closure story.

It acknowledges that after years of customers being told that banking had become digital, there remains enough demand for physical, face-to-face banking to require buildings with people in them.

The difference is that the building is now shared.

A Banking Hub normally provides a common counter service operated by the Post Office, while representatives from participating banks attend on different days. Customers can perform everyday transactions and arrange to speak face-to-face with somebody from their own bank.

It is not the restoration of the traditional branch.

It is something new: banking infrastructure separated from the individual bank's desire to maintain its own premises.

That model is spreading across Scotland.

It has emerged in communities that have already lost branches and in places facing the departure of their remaining banks. Modern Scot's public directory now records conventional branches alongside Banking Hubs and branches already scheduled to close.

Since September 2024, a new statutory access-to-cash regime has also required designated banks and building societies to assess gaps in local cash provision and address significant deficiencies.

There is a rather important catch.

The FCA's powers do not prevent a bank from closing a branch. The regulator can require measures to protect reasonable access to cash where a closure produces a significant gap, but those measures may be an ATM, a Post Office facility or a Banking Hub rather than another conventional branch.

The policy objective is therefore no longer preservation of the branch network.

It is mitigation of what happens after that network disappears.

Counting What Disappeared

That brings Scotland to the present position.

Which? now calculates that 751 of the 1,041 Scottish branches in its tracking baseline have closed since 2015, with another eight scheduled to go. It says Scotland was the first part of the UK to lose more than half of its banking network.

Modern Scot has spent months reconstructing the underlying history branch by branch.

The work has produced a searchable national database containing current banking locations, Banking Hubs, scheduled closures and, at the time of publication, 714 individually identified historic branch closures.

Readers can search the database here:

<https://modern.scot/scotland-bank-access/>

The work is continuing.

The difference between the 714 presently reconstructed branches and the Which? control total does not mean the remaining closures are being ignored. It means they are being subjected to a stricter test before being entered into a database intended to become a permanent public record.

The hardest cases are disproportionately old ones: early closures, unusual institutional branches, addresses that changed, branches absorbed in mergers and sites that have largely disappeared from the modern internet.

Modern Scot will add them as the evidence is recovered.

The Ghost on the Corner

The national argument over bank closures has often been framed as a contest between nostalgia and technology.

That is too simple.

Few people seriously propose returning to an age when every transfer required a visit to the bank and every balance enquiry required a cashier. Online banking is faster for millions of people. Mobile applications are useful. Contactless payment is convenient.

The question is what else was contained inside the thing that disappeared.



Wick — Royal Bank of Scotland, 1 Bridge Street The former Royal Bank of Scotland at 1 Bridge Street, Wick, a monumental stone banking building whose clock tower still dominates the streetscape. The branch was part of the great retreat from physical banking in the Highlands. Photograph: Historic Environment Scotland / Trove.

A bank was a private company, certainly.

It was also part of the machinery of a town.

Its presence brought workers into the high street. Businesses deposited cash. Customers obtained help. Financial problems had a physical place where they could be taken. The building itself often occupied a prominent position because banking once considered

visibility and permanence commercially valuable.

The new system distributes those functions elsewhere.

Cash may go through the Post Office. Advice may be obtained by telephone. Payments travel through an app. More complex matters may require a journey. A Banking Hub may restore a measure of personal service on particular days.

It may prove to be a perfectly workable settlement.

But it is not the system Scotland had.

In barely a decade, a country with one of the most recognisable banking traditions in the world has conducted a vast experiment in removing the physical bank from everyday life.

The experiment is still under way.

There are buildings across Scotland that retain the architecture of confidence long after the institution that commissioned it has gone.

They are the ghosts on the corner.

And beneath the arguments about apps, efficiency, cash and commercial freedom lies a quieter question that will probably take another decade to answer.

The banks say their customers left the branches. Scotland's high streets tell the other half of the story. Technology moved fast, leaving behind those great old buildings... beautiful monuments built to promise permanence, suddenly without a purpose. The customers moved on. The banks moved out. The buildings remained, keeping watch over the towns they had served.

Search the Modern Scot Scotland Bank Access Database

Modern Scot's developing national database brings together current bank branches, Banking Hubs, scheduled closures and individually researched historical closures across Scotland. The historical record is still being reconstructed. If you remember a branch that closed and believe it should be included -- particularly if you have an old address, photograph, closure notice or other evidence -- please contact Modern Scot.

<https://modern.scot/scotland-bank-access/>

The historical archive will continue to be expanded and corrected as additional branch-level evidence is recovered.

Sources

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Post Office — Everyday Banking <https://www.postoffice.co.uk/everydaybanking>

Modern Scot — Scotland Bank Access <https://modern.scot/scotland-bank-access/>

INFRASTRUCTURE | 11 August 2026

Some Scottish Sewer-Overflow Projects Move Into The 2030s As Regulators Question The Starting Line

Read online: <https://modern.scot/some-scottish-sewer-overflow-projects-move-into-the-2030s-as-regulators-question-the-starting-line/>



Minutes published in July reveal that Scottish Water, SEPA and the Scottish Government do not share the same understanding of the baseline for a national sewer-overflow improvement programme. The economic regulator is also asking why projects have moved into later investment periods — and what customers received from investment made instead.

Scotland has a programme to improve some of its most problematic sewer overflows. Five years after

that work began, the organisations responsible for delivering, regulating and overseeing it are still trying to establish precisely what the starting commitment was.

Minutes of the Water Industry Investment Group, published by the Scottish Government on 16 July 2026 following a meeting on 11 March, record an unusually direct disagreement involving Scottish Water, the Scottish Environment Protection Agency, the Scottish Government and the Water Industry Commission for Scotland. The discussion concerned the Improving Urban Waters Routemap and the programme of work associated with sewer overflows classed as unsatisfactory.

Combined sewer overflows are built into wastewater networks as safety valves. During heavy rainfall, when the volume entering a combined sewer exceeds its capacity, an overflow can release diluted wastewater into a river, burn, loch or coastal water rather than allowing sewage to back up into homes, businesses and streets. Their existence does not in itself indicate a failing sewer. Problems arise where an overflow operates in dry weather, contributes to poor water quality, releases excessive sewage-related debris or fails to meet licence conditions.

Scottish Water says it has more than 4,080 overflows across its network. Around 3,200 have been assessed as satisfactory and around 900 as unsatisfactory. From those, studies identified 108 high-priority assets for improvement.

It is the status of those 108 that produced the disagreement recorded in March.

The Scottish Government challenged the baseline Scottish Water was presenting, saying it did not align with the original commitments or with SEPA's expectations. Scottish Water said there had been an original list of 108 sites but argued that “a formal baseline had never been established”, adding that delivery numbers had always depended on the funding available and that there would be competing demands for investment in the next regulatory period.

SEPA's position was different. It told the group that 108 represented its baseline expectation, said it had written to Scottish Water and indicated that it was moving towards a regulatory position. Scottish Water

and SEPA had already been discussing detailed site lists and arrangements allowing projects to be substituted where necessary.

The disagreement becomes more concrete when the programme is narrowed to overflows known to affect water quality.

SEPA identifies 24 combined sewer overflows in the 2021–27 River Basin Management Plan as affecting water-quality classification. At the March meeting, the Scottish Government said only 19 of those 24 were expected to be delivered. Scottish Water agreed to check the number of relevant River Basin Management Plan projects, so 19 should not yet be treated as a final reconciled total.

The Water Industry Commission for Scotland then raised a separate concern: when the remaining work would actually be done.

WICS expressed concern that a “significant number” of projects to address unsatisfactory intermittent discharges were being rephased into the next investment period, SR27, which runs from 2027 to 2033. According to the minutes, the regulator asked why delivery had slipped, why projects were being moved and what Scottish Water had invested in during the current period instead. The meeting recorded that there was “not yet full confidence in the proposed baseline.”

Scottish Water acknowledged that the timetable extends further still. It told the group that some projects had moved into the Strategic Review 2033–39 period, known as SR33. SEPA separately confirmed its view that some investment intended for the current SR21 period had been rephased into SR27.

Those statements do not mean that all 108 high-priority overflows were originally due to be fixed by 2027.

Scottish Water's published framework assigns different indicative timescales according to the problem being addressed. For high-priority overflows affecting water quality, the indicative delivery date is 2027. For high-priority overflows that spill during dry weather or cause serious sewage-related debris, it is 2031. Scottish Water states explicitly that those timescales are subject to investment prioritisation and planning.

The numerical picture has also changed as engineers have studied the network.

Scottish Water says that, since the routemap was published in December 2021, it has been developing solutions for the original 108 high-priority UID needs while also examining medium-priority sites and other overflows connected hydraulically to them. It now has 145 UIDs in development and predicts 97 solutions will be completed before December 2027. Some high-priority sites in densely connected urban sewer systems have proved to require much more extensive investigation and engineering than initially understood.

That means 108 sites, 145 UIDs and 97 solutions cannot legitimately be treated as three comparable totals. One engineering solution may involve several connected assets; priorities can change as more is learned about a sewer catchment; and some proposed interventions can be substituted or redesigned.

The problem identified in the March meeting is therefore not an unexplained arithmetic gap between 108 and 97. It is the absence of a common baseline against which changes to the programme can be followed from one investment period to another.

That problem had already attracted scrutiny from outside the water industry.

Environmental Standards Scotland concluded in September 2024 that there was no comprehensive, publicly available picture of the scale and environmental impact of storm-overflow spills in Scotland. It recommended that Scottish Water publish an accessible improvement plan identifying the locations requiring work, the

timetable for each and, where no timetable had been settled, when a decision would be made.

The watchdog did not conclude that Scotland's wastewater system was simply deteriorating. Its investigation found substantial long-term improvement: wastewater was identified as a pressure on 208 surface water bodies in the Scotland River Basin District in 2008, falling to 48 in 2020. It also cautioned that the condition assigned to a whole river or other water body can mask more localised effects from sewage discharges.

SEPA likewise records a long history of investment. Between 2010 and 2021 it required Scottish Water to improve 279 sewer overflows and 104 wastewater treatment works because they were causing significant pollution. It currently says 87 per cent of Scotland's waters have good or better water quality.

Scottish Water's present Improving Urban Waters programme is backed by around £500 million of investment and includes sewer upgrades, treatment works, monitoring and measures intended to reduce the effects of overflow events. Its original routemap was published in December 2021 and has been followed by annual updates. The company has also substantially expanded overflow monitoring and publication of data since the programme began.

The timing dispute is arising just as Scotland decides how much Scottish Water should be allowed to raise from customers during the next investment period.

On 30 June, WICS published its draft determination for 2027–33. The regulator describes the process as setting the maximum amount Scottish Water can charge customers while determining the investment programme and service improvements those charges are expected to fund. The consultation remains open until 1 September.

Household water and wastewater charges increased by 8.67 per cent in nominal terms for 2026–27. WICS says that adds about £42 a year to the average household bill. The increase funds Scottish Water's wider service and investment requirements and cannot be attributed specifically to sewer-overflow projects, but it explains why the regulator's question about rephased investment goes beyond an internal disagreement over spreadsheets.

The same March minutes show Scottish Water forecasting total investment of £1.126 billion in 2026–27 against a planned £1.210 billion, a difference of £84 million. Scottish Water explained that the gap represented headroom needed to retain flexibility for responsive investment. There is therefore no basis in the minutes for describing £84 million as a simple cut or underspend.

What the records do show is that work expected within one regulatory framework is now, in some cases, appearing in the next one or even the 2033–39 period, while Scottish Water and its environmental regulator maintain different positions about the original baseline.

By April 2027, the Improving Urban Waters Routemap will have been running for more than five years. A single public record showing the original high-priority sites, what has been completed, what has been redesigned or substituted, what remains outstanding, and which work has moved into later investment periods would allow genuine changes in engineering need to be distinguished from deferred commitments.

Without that common ledger, projects can move from one six-year investment period to another while every organisation involved remains capable of describing its own figures accurately.

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INFRASTRUCTURE | 11 August 2026

Dunfermline's Northern Link Road Moves Towards Planning As £70m Road Programme Takes Shape

Read online: <https://modern.scot/dunfermlines-northern-link-road-moves-towards-planning-as-70m-road-programme-takes-shape/>



Fife Council is preparing to seek planning permission for the first council-led section of a new strategic road across the north of Dunfermline. The scheme includes a new railway bridge, closure of a level crossing and a mixture of council- and developer-built sections forming part of a much larger programme of housing and employment growth.

A new road network is beginning to take shape around the northern edge of Dunfermline.

Fife Council says it aims to submit a planning application during August for the first council-led section of the Northern Link Road, running between Kingseat Road and Pleasance Road behind Halbeath Retail Park.

The proposed section includes a new bridge carrying the road across the Fife Circle railway line. Developed with Network Rail, the bridge is intended to allow the existing Kingseat Road level crossing to close. Subject to approvals and the delivery programme, the council expects the bridge to be completed in early 2028.

The Northern Link Road will not be constructed as a single conventional road project. Instead, sections are expected to appear gradually as development proceeds across northern Dunfermline. Some will be built directly by developers within their sites, while other sections will be delivered by Fife Council using financial contributions secured through planning permissions.

The completed route is intended to accommodate general traffic and buses, while also providing a longer-distance corridor for walking, wheeling and cycling.

The scale of the wider programme is considerably larger than the first planning application might suggest.

Fife Council says more than £70 million of road-improvement projects are expected to be delivered across Dunfermline over the next two decades as the city expands.

That £70 million should not be interpreted as the cost of the Northern Link Road itself. The council describes the link road as a multi-million-pound project; the larger figure relates to a programme of road improvements across Dunfermline.

The roots of the programme go back several years.

In 2021, Fife Council approved the business case for its Dunfermline Strategic Transportation Intervention Measures programme, designed to provide infrastructure capable of supporting major development around what was then still officially a town.

At that stage, the council said the wider Dunfermline Strategic Development Area had the potential to

accommodate approximately 8,000 homes, including up to 2,000 affordable homes, alongside around 80 hectares of employment land, new primary schools and other community facilities.

Those figures describe the development capacity identified in the strategy rather than a guarantee that every proposed home will ultimately be constructed. They nevertheless illustrate why the transport programme extends well beyond relieving pressure at a single junction.

The infrastructure is intended to help make the development possible.

In October 2021, nearly £5 million from the Scottish Government's Housing Infrastructure Fund was awarded to Fife Council for infrastructure supporting the Dunfermline expansion. The Edinburgh and South East Scotland City Region Deal continues to identify Dunfermline as one of the region's strategic housing-growth locations.

Development is now becoming increasingly visible around Halbeath.

Taylor Wimpey's Whitefields masterplan is intended to deliver around 1,400 homes, together with a primary school, shops, community facilities, open space and transport infrastructure.

An infrastructure application submitted for later phases of Whitefields included main roads, drainage, landscaping and a section of the Northern Link Road intended eventually to connect with the new council-led railway bridge.

The emerging road is therefore being assembled through several planning and development processes rather than appearing through one construction contract.

That also means there is no single published completion date for the whole Northern Link Road. Fife Council says sections will be delivered in phases as required, reflecting the progress of the developments they are intended to serve.

The project has previously attracted political opposition.

In 2023, Fife Greens called for the broader Northern Link Road proposal to be reconsidered following the adoption of Scotland's National Planning Framework 4. The group raised concerns about the proposed route's relationship with Townhill Country Park, active-travel routes and policies intended to reduce car dependency.

That was a political objection to the broader project and should not be confused with a formal planning determination on the particular Kingseat Road-to-Pleasance Road section now being prepared.

The distinction between the first section and the eventual road is important.

The immediate proposal is for a connection between Kingseat Road and Pleasance Road, including the railway bridge and associated infrastructure. The wider Northern Link Road is intended to become a strategic corridor connecting development areas across the northern side of Dunfermline.

Its financing is equally significant.

Rather than Fife Council meeting the entire cost directly, development itself is helping create the infrastructure required to support further development. Some road sections are being delivered by housebuilders; others are expected to be financed through developer contributions collected by the council.

That model connects the pace of road construction directly to the pace of housebuilding and commercial development around it.

Dunfermline's circumstances have also changed since the transport business case was approved. The town became Scotland's newest city in 2022, while the large strategic development areas envisaged in earlier plans continue to progress.

The Northern Link Road is therefore more than an isolated highway proposal. It forms part of a long-term restructuring of the northern edge of the city, connecting new housing, employment land and existing transport routes while replacing a railway level crossing with a bridge.

The council has not presented the scheme simply as a bypass or congestion project. Its earlier business case explicitly connected transport investment with the delivery of housing, employment land, schools and economic development.

The forthcoming planning application will concern only one part of that larger system.

On paper, it is a road between Kingseat Road and Pleasance Road and a bridge over a railway.

In practice, it is the first council-led piece of a transport corridor intended to knit together some of the largest development areas around Dunfermline — financed and built gradually as the city itself expands around it.

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TRANSPORT | 11 August 2026

Scottish Bus Study Warns 2030 Electric Transition Could Push Rural Operators Out

Read online: <https://modern.scot/scottish-bus-study-warns-2030-electric-transition-could-push-rural-operators-out/>



Scottish Ministers have powers to restrict newly registered non-zero-emission buses from local services from a date no earlier than 2030. But research commissioned by Transport Scotland found a clear consensus that the earliest date is too soon and warned that smaller operators dependent on the second-hand market could be pushed out unless the transition is carefully managed.

On 25 March, Transport Scotland announced £45 million of new funding for zero-emission buses and coaches. On the same day, it published research examining whether

Scotland was ready for the next stage of bus decarbonisation.

The two publications present rather different sides of the transition.

The £45 million award, made through the third Scottish Zero Emission Bus Challenge Fund, or ScotZEB3, will support 334 zero-emission vehicles (227 buses and 107 coaches) together with charging infrastructure. Funding was awarded to projects involving Rock Road, Stagecoach, Lothian, Ember and First Bus.

Transport Scotland commissioned engineering consultancy Sweco to obtain the views of bus operators and local transport authorities on the use of new powers contained in the Bus Services Act 2025. Those powers allow Scottish Ministers to specify a date, no earlier than 1 January 2030, after which certain newly registered buses producing specified tailpipe emissions could no longer be used on registered local services in Scotland. The legislation also allows ministers to create exemptions for particular vehicles or services.

The measure does not mean every diesel bus already operating in Scotland would have to disappear in 2030. The restriction concerns vehicles first registered on or after the date eventually specified by ministers. Existing vehicles could continue operating, subject to the eventual regulations.

That is particularly important for smaller operators, because some rely heavily on the second-hand market rather than routinely buying new vehicles.

Sweco's study found a "clear consensus that 2030 is too early", with an emerging preference for 2035. Local transport authorities generally favoured earlier implementation to meet environmental targets, while bus operators tended to favour later dates because of operational limitations, technology and the residual value of vehicles already in their fleets.

The difficulties identified extend well beyond the price of buying an electric bus.

Respondents cited the cost of zero-emission vehicles, shortage of skilled personnel, vehicle range, charging infrastructure and electricity-grid capacity. Transport Scotland's published findings say rural operators can

face particularly high charging-infrastructure costs because of geography, while long-distance services face additional problems around vehicle range and finding charging facilities along routes.

Grid capacity was identified as a constraint that operators and councils cannot themselves resolve. The study found that the combination of currently cost-effective zero-emission vehicles and available local grid capacity does not yet allow straightforward one-for-one replacement across the range of bus types, routes and distances represented in its sample. Rural operators also raised concerns about the resilience of charging infrastructure during power cuts.

The position of smaller operators produced one of the report's strongest warnings.

Sweco found concern that the proposed regulation could disproportionately affect businesses dependent upon the second-hand vehicle market, saying some “could risk being pushed out of the market”. It recommended further examination of rural and isolated areas, where access to capital, grid capacity, staffing and charging infrastructure can present greater difficulties.

The research does not argue against zero-emission buses. The proposed direction of travel was generally welcomed by participants. Its conclusions instead point towards a phased implementation backed by finance and infrastructure rather than applying the earliest possible date uniformly across very different operators and parts of Scotland.

The scale of the existing transition also differs considerably across the sector.

Among the local transport authority fleets represented in the study, 94 per cent of vehicles were still diesel-powered, with only two councils operating electric buses for public bus services. Bus operators participating in the research were further ahead, with zero-emission vehicles making up about 20 per cent of their combined fleets. These figures relate to the organisations surveyed and are not a census of every bus operating in Scotland.

Sweco recommended a phased timetable, proportionate financial support and particular assistance for smaller operators. It also called for greater coordination between transport authorities, electricity-network operators and industry, and said nationwide implementation should be supported by long-term, ring-fenced funding and accessible finance.

That recommendation comes as the principal subsidy programme used to accelerate Scotland's zero-emission bus transition reaches its final phase.

Transport Scotland describes ScotZEB3 as the third and final phase of the ScotZEB subsidy scheme. It also says the £45 million awards mark the conclusion of Scottish Government funding through this programme to support large operators in making the transition to zero-emission vehicles. Previous ScotZEB rounds and the Scottish Ultra Low Emission Bus Scheme have supported around 800 buses and associated infrastructure with £154 million of capital funding since 2020.

Scotland's 2026-27 Budget allocates £85 million to low-carbon programmes, including measures supporting zero-emission vehicles and expansion of electric-vehicle charging infrastructure. Ministers are also still examining how the new bus regulation should operate.

The unresolved issue is about how the transition is financed and implemented across a highly uneven transport market.

That question arrives when Scotland's bus network has already been contracting.

There were 334 million bus passenger journeys in Scotland in 2024-25, an increase of 2 per cent on the previous year but still 31 per cent below the peak recorded in 2007-08. More than half were made through the national concessionary travel schemes. The number of buses in operators' fleets has fallen by 15 per cent since 2019-20, while the number of people employed in the industry has fallen by 10 per cent over the same period.

The position in rural Scotland is markedly different from the cities.

Transport Scotland's 2024 household survey found that 17 per cent of people in remote rural areas had used a bus during the previous month, compared with 57 per cent in large urban areas. Satisfaction with public transport was 43 per cent in remote rural areas and 41 per cent in accessible rural areas, compared with 75 per cent in large urban areas.

The disappearance of an individual commercial operator would not automatically mean every route it ran disappeared. Councils have a duty to secure public transport services they consider necessary where those needs would not otherwise be met commercially, and they can subsidise operators to provide them. Local transport authorities also now have powers to operate their own bus services.

But replacing an operator in a thin rural market may be considerably more difficult than replacing capacity in a large city, particularly if the available replacement operators face the same vehicle, charging and grid constraints identified by Transport Scotland's study. That is an inference from the combination of the Government's rural transport figures and the obstacles identified by the commissioned research.

The Scottish Government has strong reasons for wanting the transition to succeed. Buses remain central to public transport in Scotland, while eliminating diesel tailpipe emissions can reduce both greenhouse-gas emissions and local air pollution. The latest ScotZEB funding will put hundreds more zero-emission vehicles into operation, including coaches intended for longer-distance and rural services.

But Transport Scotland's own research suggests that the regulatory timetable cannot be considered separately from the electricity network, vehicle market, operator finances and geography of the services expected to comply with it.

Ministers have not yet selected the date. Transport Scotland said in March that the Scottish Government was continuing to examine its options, and the legislation expressly prevents the restriction from beginning before 1 January 2030.

That leaves time to address the weaknesses identified by the study.

It also makes the study's central finding difficult to overlook.

The law allows Scotland to begin restricting newly registered non-zero-emission buses from 2030. The research commissioned to examine whether Scotland is ready found a clear consensus that 2030 is too early.

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ECONOMY | 10 August 2026

Scotland's Power-Machinery Imports Jump 46% as Government Pushes Home-Grown Wind Manufacturing

Read online: <https://modern.scot/scotlands-power-machinery-imports-jump-46-as-government-pushes-home-grown-wind-manufacturing/>



Power-generating machinery accounted for around two-fifths of the increase in Scotland's goods imports in the year to March 2026. The statistics do not identify wind turbines specifically, but the rise comes as Scotland commits hundreds of millions of pounds to capturing more of the manufacturing value created by its renewable-energy expansion.

Buried inside Scotland's latest international trade figures is an unusually large movement in machinery.

In the year ending March 2026, Scotland's international goods imports increased by 17 per cent to £25.7 billion, while international goods exports fell by 3 per cent to £24.2 billion, according to inflation-adjusted figures published by the Scottish Government in June. The statistics cover international trade in goods but exclude services, oil and gas, and trade between Scotland and the rest of the UK.

The largest contribution to the increase in imports came from power-generating machinery.

Imports in that category rose by 46 per cent in real terms compared with the previous year and accounted for around two-fifths of the entire increase in Scottish goods imports. Imports of power-generating machinery from EU countries rose 28 per cent, while those from non-EU countries increased by 54 per cent.

The numbers arrive at an important moment for Scotland's industrial policy.

Scotland has a pipeline of around 40GW of offshore wind capacity, in addition to about 3GW already installed in Scottish waters. The Scottish Government has separately estimated that the potential global capital expenditure associated with ScotWind, INTOG and related port and supply-chain projects could reach approximately £100 billion if the full pipeline is developed.

Ministers have committed up to £500 million over five years to strengthen Scotland's offshore wind infrastructure and supply chain, with an explicit objective of securing more manufacturing, fabrication and industrial activity inside Scotland.

That makes the trade figures worth examining. But they require care.

The 46 per cent increase cannot simply be described as a surge in imported wind turbines.

HM Revenue & Customs classifies "power generating machinery and equipment" within a relatively broad international goods category. Regional trade data is not detailed enough to isolate Scottish wind-turbine imports from other generating machinery and equipment. HMRC also allocates much business trade to regions according to the proportion of a company's employees working there, rather than necessarily according to the final destination of each imported item.

There is another important qualification.

The latest increase follows a very weak previous year. In the year ending March 2025, Scottish imports of power-generating machinery had fallen by 50 per cent in real terms. The subsequent 46 per cent increase therefore partly represents a recovery from that fall and should not, on its own, be interpreted as evidence of a continuing import boom.

Scotland is also exporting large amounts of machinery classified under the same heading.

Power-generating machinery was Scotland's second-largest international goods export category in the year ending March 2026, worth £4.6 billion, behind drink at £4.9 billion. Exports of power-generating machinery increased by 30 per cent during the year and accounted for 19 per cent of Scottish international goods exports.

Scotland is therefore both a substantial importer and exporter of equipment falling within this broad category.

The more consequential economic question is what lies inside those movements — and how much of the extraordinary expenditure associated with Scotland's energy transformation ultimately becomes Scottish manufacturing, Scottish wages and permanent industrial capacity.

That is a question the Scottish Government has itself been attempting to address.

Its 2022 Onshore Wind Policy Statement acknowledged that Scotland's manufacturing supply chain for the wind industry was weak, despite the country's long experience in renewable generation. It called for Scottish suppliers to receive realistic opportunities to compete for manufacturing contracts and for greater domestic manufacturing capability to be developed as wind deployment increased.

Research commissioned by the Government into offshore renewables identified similar gaps. At the time of that work, Scotland had no major offshore-wind rotor or nacelle manufacturing facilities and no capability to manufacture high-voltage cables for offshore wind. The report identified competition from suppliers outside Scotland as one of the principal barriers to capturing greater economic benefit domestically.

There are now tangible signs of that position changing.

A £350 million Sumitomo Electric subsea cable manufacturing facility is being developed at the Port of Nigg in the Highlands. The Scottish Government says the project is among almost £900 million of public and private investment unlocked for offshore-wind ports and supply chains, with projects also involving Ardersier, Kishorn, Lerwick, Scapa, Montrose and Stornoway.

Sumitomo says its Nigg facility will manufacture high-voltage transmission cables in Scotland, including 525kV HVDC cable, while its latest plans envisage cable manufacturing for the proposed Shetland 2 connection beginning in 2027.

That is precisely the kind of industrial investment Scotland's strategy is intended to attract: turning an energy project into a manufacturing facility with the potential to serve projects beyond the immediate development that brought it here.

But Scotland's offshore wind programme also illustrates how international the supply chain remains.

The 1.1GW Inch Cape Offshore Wind Farm, under construction off Angus, provides a useful example.

Its published construction supply chain includes Vestas for the turbines, CWHI and Dajin Offshore for

monopile foundations, COOEC-Fluor for jacket foundations and Orient Cable for export-cable fabrication. Scottish facilities nevertheless play substantial roles: Leith is being used for foundation marshalling, Dundee for turbine marshalling and Montrose as an offshore construction and operations base.

Some of the largest physical components have travelled considerably farther.

CWHI says the 32 enormous monopiles it supplied for Inch Cape were fabricated at its Qinzhou yard in China before being transported to the Port of Leith. Each is up to 103 metres long and can weigh as much as 2,300 tonnes.

That does not mean Scotland receives little economic benefit from Inch Cape. Scottish ports, construction services, engineering, logistics and long-term operations can all capture value even where equipment is manufactured elsewhere.

It does, however, demonstrate the distinction between hosting an energy project and manufacturing the capital equipment used to build it.

The size of that distinction is likely to become increasingly important.

Crown Estate Scotland's latest Supply Chain Development Statements show that 16 ScotWind projects currently anticipate £25.5 billion of expenditure in Scotland, an average of £1.6 billion per project across development, construction, manufacturing, operations and maintenance.

Those figures are projections rather than money already spent. Crown Estate Scotland itself says the statements are intended to provide visibility of anticipated supply-chain activity as projects develop and are updated as technology, timing and procurement become clearer.

That will matter enormously when Scotland eventually assesses what its offshore-wind programme actually delivered economically.

A project can create Scottish jobs without manufacturing its turbines here. It can use Scottish ports while importing its foundations. It can support domestic engineering companies while buying major electrical equipment overseas. Equally, an imported technology today can lead to a factory being established in Scotland tomorrow, as the Nigg cable investment illustrates.

Simple claims that Scotland is either “winning” or “losing” the renewable supply-chain race therefore obscure a much more useful question.

How much of the value is Scotland actually retaining?

The latest trade statistics cannot answer that.

They establish that imports of the broad power-generating-machinery category increased sharply in the latest year, while exports from the same category also increased substantially. They do not reveal which individual renewable-energy projects generated those flows, exactly which components were involved, where each component was manufactured or how much of its value remained within Scotland.

There is a further reason to avoid drawing conclusions the statistics cannot support. The Scottish Government describes this inflation-adjusted regional trade series as official statistics in development, meaning there is greater uncertainty than would apply to fully accredited official statistics. HMRC's regional methodology and broad commodity classifications introduce further limitations when trying to trace individual pieces of industrial equipment.

Yet the figures illuminate the economic question Scotland will increasingly have to answer.

The country possesses the wind resource. It is leasing the seabed. Ports are being expanded. Transmission infrastructure is being rebuilt. Public money is being committed to attracting factories. Developers are forecasting tens of billions of pounds of Scottish expenditure.

The eventual measure of industrial success cannot therefore be generating capacity alone.

It will be whether that enormous programme leaves Scotland with factories, skills, suppliers, intellectual property and exportable industrial capability capable of surviving long after the construction phase has ended.

The more revealing ledger will be the one showing where the turbines, towers, cables, foundations and electrical equipment were made — and where the money used to make them ultimately stayed.

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ENVIRONMENT | 10 August 2026

Scottish Government Said Wind-Farm Woodland Loss Was ‘Small’. FLS Says It Cannot Calculate It

Read online: <https://modern.scot/scottish-government-said-wind-farm-woodland-loss-was-small-fls-says-it-cannot-calculate-it/>



Forestry and Land Scotland has disclosed the individual developments associated with more than 8,600 hectares of forestry felling on Scotland’s national estate, but says it lacks complete restocking data and cannot calculate the resulting net woodland loss.

Forestry and Land Scotland has disclosed the individual wind-farm developments behind more than 8,600 hectares of forestry felling on land it manages for the Scottish Ministers since 2000.

Wind-Farm Developments And Recorded Forestry Felling

Forestry and Land Scotland supplied the following development-by-development figures. Together they total 8,611.44 hectares of recorded felling associated with wind-farm development on FLS-managed land.

1. Arecleoch — 584 hectares
2. Whitelee 1 — 601 hectares
3. Whitelee 2 — 644 hectares
4. Myres Hill — 0 hectares
5. Beinn an Tuirc 1 — 229 hectares
6. Blacklaw — 260 hectares
7. Little Clyde — 300 hectares
8. An Suidhe — 3 hectares
9. Cruach Mhor — 398 hectares
10. Deucheran Hill — 9 hectares
11. Camster — 381.3 hectares
12. Rulhes II — 0 hectares
13. Beinn an Tuirc 2 — 550 hectares
14. Harestanes — 684 hectares
15. Mid Hill 1 — 169 hectares
16. Mid Hill 2 — 0 hectares
17. Clashindarroch — 239 hectares
18. Strouptier — 414 hectares
19. Burn of Whilk — 385 hectares
20. A'Chruach — 475 hectares
21. Blackraig — 38.8 hectares
22. Halsary — 613 hectares
23. Beinn an Tuirc 3 — 81.64 hectares
24. Kilgallioch — 530.4 hectares
25. South Kyle — 225.15 hectares
26. West Benhar — 15.62 hectares
27. Camster 2 — 7 hectares
28. North Kyle — 440.36 hectares
29. Hartwood — 3.56 hectares
30. Clash 2 — 102.2 hectares
31. Pincloe — 37.28 hectares
32. Arecleoch Extension — 78.83 hectares
33. Golliscay — 12.3 hectares

Total: 8,611.44 hectares

These figures represent area recorded as felled in connection with each development. They do not represent confirmed permanent woodland loss.

The information, released to Modern Scot on 10 August, identifies 33 development entries associated with 8,611.44 hectares of recorded felling.

The largest recorded area is at Harestanes, with 684 hectares felled. Whitelee 2 accounts for 644 hectares, Halsary 613 hectares, Whitelee 1 601 hectares, Arecleoch 584 hectares, Beinn an Tuirc 2 550 hectares and Kilgallioch 530.4 hectares.

The ten largest entries alone account for about 5,536 hectares, or 64 per cent of the total.

The disclosure provides a clearer picture of which developments account for the felling, but it also exposes a substantial gap in the national record: FLS says it cannot calculate how much woodland has actually been lost as a result of wind-farm development.

That is particularly notable because an official Scottish Government environmental information response published on 15 July said that many of the trees would have been due for normal forest-management felling and many would have been replaced through replanting and compensatory planting, “meaning the net loss for renewables developments is small.”

FLS’s subsequent response to Modern Scot is considerably less certain.

Asked how much of the 8,611 hectares represented permanent woodland removal and how much had subsequently been restocked on the original sites, FLS said it does not have complete data on the number of hectares restocked following wind-farm-related felling.

Asked directly for its calculation of the net woodland loss attributable specifically to wind-farm development, the agency said it currently has “insufficient data available in order to calculate the net loss of woodland due to windfarm development.”

The two statements do not necessarily prove that the Scottish Government's assessment is wrong. They do, however, leave an important evidential gap between describing the net loss as small and being able to calculate what that loss actually is.

There is also an important qualification surrounding the Scottish Government's estimate that 17.2 million trees have been felled.

The July response calculated that figure by multiplying the 8,611 hectares by an average of 2,000 trees per hectare.

FLS has now clarified that 2,000 trees per hectare is intended only as a guide, based on initial planting densities. Older tree crops, it said, naturally contain fewer surviving trees as they age.

The 17.2 million figure should therefore not be understood as a count of individual trees known to have been felled. The more firmly established figure is the area recorded as felled: 8,611 hectares, or 8,611.44 hectares when the individual entries supplied by FLS are totalled.

The disclosure also shows that the land affected extends beyond turbine positions themselves.

Modern Scot asked whether the total included woodland removed for access roads, substations, transmission infrastructure, compounds, borrow pits and other associated works.

FLS said that, with the exception of transmission infrastructure, all of those elements are included in the total.

The agency also said the figures relate to conifer plantations rather than native or ancient woodland sites.

That distinction is important because much of the national forest estate consists of commercial forestry intended to be harvested and replanted.

The Scottish Government made that point explicitly in 2024, when the corresponding figure stood at 8,503 hectares. It said the majority represented commercial forestry which would eventually have been felled at the end of its normal rotation.

Modern Scot therefore asked how much of the felling would have occurred through ordinary commercial harvesting if the wind-farm developments had never proceeded.

FLS responded that all woodland on the sites was projected to be felled during a period falling within the respective developments' lease terms.

That response does not provide a numerical answer to the counterfactual question. It does not establish how much woodland was felled earlier than it otherwise would have been, how much was subsequently replanted on the original site, or how much land was permanently converted to infrastructure.

Those distinctions determine the difference between gross felling and permanent woodland loss.

The record becomes still more fragmented when compensatory planting is considered.

FLS says determining the amount of compensatory planting required for these developments is outside its control and that the relevant planning authorities must instead be contacted.

It does not hold project-level records identifying the location, planting date, developer and species associated with each compensatory planting scheme. Nor does it hold information showing whether developers failed or

were delayed in meeting those obligations, or whether enforcement action followed.

There is therefore no single FLS record from which the public can establish how much woodland was permanently removed, how much was restored on the original sites, how much compensatory woodland was required elsewhere, how much was actually planted and how much remains outstanding.

FLS cannot provide a year-by-year history of the felling either. It says its current information records felling according to the order in which schemes were developed rather than separating it by year. The increase from the previously reported 8,503 hectares to 8,611 hectares represents an additional year of data.

It also says it does not hold project-level carbon assessments bringing together tree felling, peat and soil disturbance, construction, electricity generation and replacement planting.

None of this establishes that 8,611 hectares of woodland have been permanently lost. That would be an inaccurate conclusion from the available evidence.

What the disclosure establishes is more precise.

More than 8,600 hectares of conifer plantation on FLS-managed land have been recorded as felled in connection with wind-farm development since 2000. We now know the individual development figures behind that total.

But after more than two decades of development, the national land manager says it does not have complete restocking data and cannot calculate the resulting net woodland loss.

The Scottish Government has described that loss as small.

The number demonstrating how small it is remains unavailable.

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Forestry and Land Scotland — D Scheme Felling Totals 2026 Attachment supplied with response SEC-26-151. This document gives the individual felling figures for all 33 development entries, totalling 8,611.44 hectares. D Scheme Felling Totals 2026

Scottish Government — Forestry and Land Scotland: Number of Felled Trees for Windfarm Development, EIR/202600515058, published 15 July 2026 <https://www.gov.scot/publications/foi-202600515058/>

This is the source for the Government's figure of 8,611 hectares, its estimated 17.2 million trees based on an average of 2,000 trees per hectare, and its statement that replanting and compensatory planting mean that the net loss for renewable developments is “small”.

Scottish Government — Hectares of Forestry Used for Wind Farms, EIR/202400408449, published 30 April 2024 <https://www.gov.scot/publications/eir-202400408449/>

This is the source for the earlier 8,503-hectare figure and the Government's statement that the majority was commercial forestry which would have been felled at the end of its normal rotation. It also records that FLS did not hold compensatory-planting and year-by-year information at that time.

Scottish Forestry — Control of Woodland Removal

Policy<https://www.forestry.gov.scot/publications/control-woodland-removal-policy>

The policy defines woodland removal as permanent removal of woodland for a change of land use and sets out the Scottish Government's policy and regulatory framework governing such removal.

Scottish Forestry — Scottish Government's Policy on Control of Woodland Removal: Implementation

Guidance<https://www.forestry.gov.scot/publications/scottish-governments-policy-control-woodland-removal-implementation-guidance>

The implementation guidance specifically applies to proposals affecting forests, including wind farms, roads and power lines, and explains how consenting authorities and applicants should apply woodland-removal policy.

ENERGY | 10 August 2026

The £11 Million Rent Beneath Moray's Wind and the 67 Turbines That Could Follow

Read online: <https://modern.scot/the-11-million-rent-beneath-morays-wind-and-the-67-turbines-that-could-follow/>



Court papers exposed an index-linked £6 million minimum rent at Dorenell Wind Farm; subsequent reporting found the land payment had reached about £11 million a year. Now a much larger extension is under consultation in Moray, as Scotland considers raising what developers are encouraged, but not required, to give neighbouring communities.

Fifty-nine turbines stand on the hills south of Dufftown. Each reaches about 126 metres at blade tip. Together they form the 177MW Dorenell Wind Farm,

fully commissioned in March 2019 and capable, according to its operator, of producing enough electricity for up to 106,000 homes.

For years, one of the most consequential numbers attached to those turbines was invisible to the people living around them: what the land itself was worth to the company using it.

Then the landlord and the wind-farm company went to court.

The dispute between Glenfiddich Wind Limited and Dorenell Windfarm Limited reached the Outer House of the Court of Session in 2025. It was a commercial action about the interpretation of the lease covering Scaut Hill, but the judgment did something much more unusual. It opened part of the financial machinery behind a major Scottish wind farm to public view.

The lease provided for an index-linked minimum annual rent of £6 million. The actual rent could be higher because it was calculated by reference to elements of the wind farm's gross income. Court papers record that Dorenell had paid £8,496,981 for one disputed rent year, £9,480,725 for the next and £10,406,641 for the following year. Glenfiddich Wind argued that further sums were due. Lord Sandison's findings produced a mixture of outcomes on the disputed contractual issues, with the precise orders left for the parties to address afterwards.

The disagreement centred in part on what happens financially when Dorenell is able to generate electricity but is instructed to reduce output because the transmission system cannot accommodate all of it. Electricity generators can submit bids through the Balancing Mechanism to reduce generation during such constraints. The lease dispute concerned whether benefits arising in those circumstances should feed into the calculation of rent.

What had been a private commercial agreement was suddenly capable of being measured.

The Ferret subsequently reported, using the court material alongside its wider investigation into Scottish wind-farm land rents, that the annual payment associated with Dorenell had risen to about £11 million in 2025. It reported that this was 23 times the £464,625 paid to communities that year.

Land rent and community benefit are not equivalent payments. The first is consideration negotiated under a commercial lease. The second is a voluntary arrangement intended to leave benefits in communities hosting renewable infrastructure. One does not create a legal entitlement to the other, and the difference between them does not establish wrongdoing.

But the difference reveals something about the rules governing each side of the hill.

The landowner's minimum rent is contractual, index-linked and capable of rising with defined wind-farm income. Community benefit operates under a different system altogether.

Foundation Scotland, which administers the existing Dorenell Community Benefit Fund, says approximately £447,000 was paid into the fund in its first year, equivalent to £2,525 for every megawatt of installed capacity. The annual donation then rises with the Retail Price Index. The fund serves Cabrach, Dufftown and District, Glenlivet and Inveravon, and Glenrinnies.

Its latest detailed report provides another useful distinction. Between April 2024 and March 2025, £397,353 was awarded to 22 projects. That is money granted out of the fund during the year, rather than the annual contribution made into it, and should not be confused with The Ferret's £464,625 payment figure. The projects ranged from community facilities and youth work to heritage, energy efficiency and a new footpath network. More than £2 million had been awarded in the fund's first five years of grant-making.

It matters because another Dorenell is now before the Scottish Government.

The Dorenell Extension Wind Farm remains listed by the Energy Consents Unit as under consultation. The application, received on 8 August 2025, is for 67 turbines, ranging from 149.9 metres to 250 metres high, alongside associated infrastructure and a battery energy storage system. The Energy Consents Unit records a maximum total development capacity of 497MW. Developer Galileo gives the wind-generation component as 476.6MW.

This is therefore not an abstract debate about the economics of a development already built. Moray is considering what could amount to a second, substantially larger generation project on the Cabrach and Glenfiddich estates at the same time as the financial arrangements around the first have become unusually visible.

Galileo says the extension would provide a community package of almost £2.4 million a year, which it describes as worth about £100 million over an expected 40-year operating life. The proposal includes annual electricity-cost contributions of £1,849 for households within five kilometres of the wind-farm boundary and £924 for households between five and eight kilometres, with those household contributions intended to rise with inflation. It also proposes £50,000 a year for local skills, £100,000 a year for biodiversity and nature, a regeneration fund of up to £1.6 million, two local project workers and continued exploration of community ownership of up to five per cent of the wind farm.

The £2.4 million figure has an interesting provenance.

Scotland's current Good Practice Principles recommend that onshore wind developers provide community benefit worth £5,000 per installed megawatt each year, index-linked over a project's operating life. These principles are voluntary and community benefit is not a material consideration when deciding whether a development receives planning consent.

Multiply Galileo's stated 476.6MW wind capacity by that £5,000 benchmark and the result is £2.383 million a year.

That is almost exactly the community package being proposed.

But in February 2026 the Scottish Government proposed changing the benchmark to £6,000 per MW per year, also index-linked. It acknowledged that £5,000 from 2014 would be worth approximately £6,900 after inflation, but said its proposed £6,000 figure balanced the loss of value to communities against increased costs and other pressures facing developers. The refreshed guidance has been presented as a proposal, rather than a statutory charge.

Apply £6,000 to Dorenell Extension's stated 476.6MW wind capacity and the result is £2,859,600 a year.

That is £476,600 more than the calculation at £5,000 per MW. Over 40 years the difference would be £19.064 million before indexation.

This is a Modern Scot calculation using only Galileo's stated wind-generation capacity. It does not include the proposed battery system, for which the Scottish Government is separately considering a community-benefit benchmark of at least £150 per MW per year.

None of that means the extension's present community offer breaches Scottish Government guidance. The £6,000 figure remains proposed guidance; community benefits remain voluntary; and the Government itself says arrangements can take different forms following negotiation between developers and communities. But it demonstrates how much money can turn on a change of £1,000 per megawatt when a development approaches 500MW and may operate for four decades.

The financial offer is also only one part of the extension decision.

The Cairngorms National Park Authority objected to the application in March 2026. Its assessment said the scale and proximity of the development would significantly exacerbate adverse effects on the landscape qualities of parts of the National Park. Nineteen of the proposed turbines would reach 250 metres, compared with the existing Dorenell turbines at about 126 metres, and the closest proposed turbines would stand about half a kilometre from the Park boundary.

NatureScot also objected to the submitted design unless changes were made. Its January response said the proposal as submitted would have significant adverse effects on the special qualities of the Cairngorms National Park and recommended the removal, relocation or reduction of a number of turbines.

There is a further financial history at Dorenell that sits separately from both the lease dispute and community benefit.

In March 2024, Ofgem said Dorenell Windfarm Limited had accepted that its bidding approach during transmission constraints breached a condition of its electricity generation licence. The company regarded the breach as unintentional and said it had not intended to obtain excessive benefit. It changed its bid-pricing policy and agreed to pay £5.53 million into the Energy Redress Fund. Ofgem then closed the matter without a formal enforcement investigation.

The Ofgem case and the landlord's Court of Session action concerned different legal questions and should not be conflated. Their common feature is that both illuminate the unusually complicated economics that can arise when abundant renewable generation meets limited transmission capacity.

The community side of the arrangement is, by contrast, deliberately kept outside the planning balance. Moray Council said in a 2025 freedom of information response that it has no role in administering or monitoring the Dorenell Community Benefit Fund, precisely because of the risk that community payments could be perceived as influencing planning decisions. The council separately receives £50,000 for public-access works for the

duration of the wind farm.

That leaves an unusual asymmetry.

A community can know the recommended number of pounds per megawatt. It can know the value of grants awarded locally. It can examine a planning application several thousand pages long. What it will rarely know is the commercial price being paid for the land hosting the turbines.

Dorenell became an exception because its landlord and operator disagreed strongly enough to litigate.

That gap sits within a much older Scottish pattern. The Scottish Land Commission currently highlights research showing that 408 owners control 50 per cent of privately owned rural land in Scotland. Scottish Government statistics record 213,803 hectares in community ownership at the end of 2024, 2.7 per cent of Scotland's total land area.

There is nothing inherently improper about receiving substantial rent for land required by a commercial energy project. Nor should community-benefit funds be dismissed as trivial: Dorenell's own reports document youth services, community staff, halls, heritage projects, energy improvements and infrastructure that might otherwise struggle for finance.

The harder issue exposed at Dorenell is transparency.

One payment is negotiated according to the commercial value of scarce land and protected by contract. The other is shaped by voluntary national guidance intended to recognise the communities living beside the infrastructure. Scotland is now considering another 67 turbines on the same landscape while proposing to change that community benchmark.

For once, Moray enters that decision with some knowledge of what the first wind farm was worth on the other side of the lease.

At Dorenell, transparency arrived through litigation. It would be a poor model for the rest of Scotland.

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HERITAGE AND ARTS | 9 August 2026

Old Scottish Fisheries – A Scotland Once Described By Its Fish

Read online: <https://modern.scot/the-old-scotch-fisheries/>



FIRST PUBLISHED IN 2016 Long before oil, whisky or tourism became shorthand for Scottish wealth, foreign visitors and Scotland's own chroniclers repeatedly remarked upon something much more elemental: the extraordinary abundance of fish in the country's rivers, lochs and surrounding seas.

Medieval writers described waters crowded with salmon, herring, trout and pike; coasts rich in oysters, crabs, lobsters and mussels; and fishing grounds

sufficiently productive to attract fleets from continental Europe. The reputation travelled far enough that Pedro de Ayala, Spanish ambassador at the court of James IV, recorded Scotland as being commonly known as *piscinata Scotia* — Scotland of the fishes.

But the history preserved in L.A. Barbe's *The Old Scottish Fisheries*, published in 1919, is considerably stranger and richer than a simple account of an industry. It is a world of royal fishing rights and monastic privileges, salmon bought for kings, thousands of herring laid in for great households, peculiar fishing structures called *yairs*, pearl-bearing mussels gathered with the toes, and stories of enormous sea creatures capable of sleeping while fastened by their teeth to coastal rocks. Fact, folklore, commerce, law and survival sit side by side.

Read more than a century after Barbe wrote it, the work provides something increasingly valuable: a view backwards into the relationship between Scotland and the waters that sustained it. The abundance he records belongs to another age, but the questions beneath it remain remarkably familiar — who may fish, who owns the rights, who profits from the resource, and what happens when something once assumed to be inexhaustible can no longer be taken for granted.

"The Old Scottish Fisheries" by L.A. Barbe, 1919

This has not been edited from its original print. The writers to whom we owe the earliest descriptions of Scotland, are all in agreement as to the abundance of fish to be found both in the inland waters and in those by which the coasts were washed. "This region", wrote John of Fordun, in the second half of the 14th century, "is manifold in its wealth of fish in sea, river, and lake." And fifty years later, the statement was briefly, but emphatically confirmed by Andrew Wyntoun: "Off fysche there is habowndance". From John Major's *History of Greater Britain*, published in 1521, we get both further corroboration and fuller details, together with an explanation of the phenomenon. It is based on the crude scientific theories of the day concerning the greater depth of the northern seas, as proved by the ocean's flowing "from the north south-wards", and as accounted for by "the air that has been turned into water".

After enumerating the chief rivers of Scotland the Forth, the Tay, the Spey, the Don, and the Dee - Major adds that they all abound in salmon, trout, and pike. He also supplies some interesting information as to the price of salmon and herring: "In most parts of Scotland", he says, "you may buy a large fresh salmon for

two duodenae, in other parts, however, for a sou; and for a laird you may carry away a hundred fresh herring.” Major also states that “near the sea is great plenty of oysters, as well as crabs and lobsters”. And he describes the shell-fish as being “of marvellous size”.

Hector Boece fully bears out all that his contemporary has written as to the great abundance of fish in Scottish waters. According to him, the harvest of the sea was so great that it would have sufficed to sustain the whole population, if the land had refused them its fruits. And as evidence that his statement is not exaggerated, he adduces the fact that fishing fleets from France, Flanders, Zeeland, Holland, and many parts of Germany annually visited the Northern Seas, about the time of Lent, that is, in the spring, and returned with such quantities of fish as not only sustained themselves, but also enabled them to provide for the wants of “all other countries”, even as far as the Mediterranean.

To mention the many localities especially referred to by Boece as being “richt plentuous and full of fische”, practically amounts to an enumeration of the chief salt and freshwater lochs, and of the more important rivers in Scotland. In Galloway, Loch Ryan and Loch Luce are “both full of oysters, herring, conger eels, mussels, and cockles, with many other fish. In Lochtyne there is a “greater plenty of herring than in any seas of Albion”. In Lochaber there are lochs and rivers “full of salmon and other fish, swimming; so plenteously that the same are taken without any skill” whilst in the Don and the Dee there is “mair fourth of salmond” than in any of the other rivers of Britain. Cockles, oysters, mussels, seals and porpoises, dolphins and whales, with great plenty of whitefish, entitle the Forth to a foremost place amongst the most productive of Scottish waters.

Two circumstances in particular impress the old chronicler as no less providential than they are marvellous. One of them is, that of all kind of fish there is “sa gret plente throw all partis of our seis, that, howbeit infinit noumer of thaim were tane away on the ta day, na thing thair of sal be mist on the morow”. The other is, that “ay the mair derth and penurie of vittallis is in Scotland, the fische swoumis with the mair abundance and plente”. Though lack of details can hardly be laid to his charge, Boece wishes it to be understood that his account of the country’s wealth is not exhaustive, and he is ready with a good reason for not attempting to make it so. “To schaw every kind of fische”, he says, “it wer bot ane faschious and vane lauboure; for the samin ar knawin to al cuntreis.” And that this is no mere boast may be gathered from Pedro de Ayala, the ambassador of Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain at the Court of James IV. In the account which he gives of Scotland, he states that it was commonly known as “piscinata Scotia”.

Scattered through the old writers’ notices of the Scottish fisheries, there are a number of marvellous stories which would do credit to Mandeville himself, and which are not without interest, as samples of some of the popular delusions of the day. To account for the disappearance from the mouth of the Tay of the herring that had formerly abounded there, Boece records the generally accepted “truth”, that when any avaricious and unhappy men fight for the fish that God sends, of His infinite goodness for the sustentation of the people, and pollute the sea with their blood, for many years after, no fish swim in that place. Nor is this the only instance of credulity with regard to a phenomenon that hardly ranks as a prodigy with the more sceptical generation of the present day. Bishop Leslie accounts in the same manner for the disappearance of herring from Lochbroom.

Far more wonderful than what may be looked upon as the superstitious explanation of an actual fact, is the account that Boece gives of a “great fish” to be found about the Orkneys. It is described as larger than any house. The “marvellous and incredible” thing about it, however, was not so much its size as its power of sleep. “This fish”, records the chronicler, “when she begins to sleep, fastens her teeth fast on a crag above the water. As soon as the mariners find her asleep they come with a strong cable in a boat; and after they have bored a great hole through her tail, they fasten her by the same. As soon as this fish is awakened she

tries to leap with great force into the sea, and when she finds herself fast, she writhes herself out of her own skin and dies. Of the fat that she has, oil is in great quantity; and of her skin, because it endures long, strong cables are made.” Any prototype that this marvellous monster may be said to have had, was probably the whale. It is less easy to identify the “uncouth and wonderful fish ” that were said to haunt the Forth. They are described as having cowls hanging over their heads like monks; and it is added that their appearance always betokened mortality of men and beasts.

In his account of the horse-mussel, with which the Dee and the Don abounded, Boece embodies the popular belief as to the origin of the pearl. Early in the morning, he says, when the air is clear and temperate, these mussels open their mouths a little above the water, and most greedily swallow the dew of heaven. In proportion to the measure and quantity of the dew that they swallow, they conceive and breed the pearl. These mussels are so “ doyn gleg ”, that is, so excessively quick, of touch and hearing that, though the sound be never so slight that is made on the bank beside them, or the stone never so small that is cast into the water, they “douk haistelie ”, and at once go to the bottom, knowing well in what estimation and price the fruit of their womb is held by all people. Though considerable allowance must be made for Boece’s credulity when he thus ventures into the realm of natural history, his accuracy is less questionable when, with the actual experience that his residence in Aberdeen may be assumed to have given him, he describes the way in which these precious horse - mussels were gathered. “ First, four or five persons pass into the river together and stand in manner of a round circle in the water, to their shoulders. Each one of them has a staff in his hand that he may not slide; and then they look and search through the clear and mpid water until they see the mussels; and because they may not take them up with their hands, they ‘cleek ’ them up with their toes, and sling them to the nearest bank”. In the earliest ages, the inhabitants of Scotland do not appear to have availed themselves of the abundance of fish that both sea and river offered them. During the Celtic period, when adoration was paid to the waters, fish was considered a forbidden food. Even after the introduction of Christianity, there were, for a time, ascetics who practised and enjoined abstinence from fish, which they considered dangerous to purity of soul. Before long, however, this prejudice ceased to be entertained, and fish became the chief article of diet on the many fast-days imposed by the Church on the faithful. But, apart from the demand created by the ecclesiastical ordinances, there was the necessity that resulted from the scantiness of fodder during the winter months, when it was found practically impossible to keep cattle in condition that suited them to be slaughtered for food. The household book of James V supplies interesting information as to the extent to which fish was used in the early decades of the 16th century- In the list of the sea-fish, the herring- fresh, salt, and red—figures conspicuously. As white fish there are both fresh and dried “ mulones ”, a term that has been translated as “cod”, though it is impossible to overlook its suggestive resemblance to “ mullet In addition to these, there are codlings, pollacks, whiting, ling, and “speldings”, which last may possibly be sprats. Frequent mention is also made of sand eels, blennies or “greenbanes,” gurnards, lump fish or “cock-paddles”, anglers or “sea-devils”, sea-cat, smelt, conger-eels, and lampreys. There appears to have been a liberal supply of flatfish, including turbot, halibut, and flounders. The sole is only occasionally referred to, as is also the “rigadia”, which may possibly be the skate or ray-fish.

Numerous entries indicate the extensive use of salmon—salted and kippered as well as fresh and also of trout, eels, perch, and pike. The occurrence of the last of these amongst the fresh water fish purchased for the royal household, in 1525, is noteworthy ‘as disposing of ’ the generally received opinion that this fish was introduced in the reign of Henry VI11, in 1537 ”, and as supporting its claim to be considered a native fish. If the term “ polupi ” has been correctly interpreted as meaning “cuttle-fish ”, its repeated appearance would indicate a partiality for what must now seem a strange, if not repulsive article of food. It seems to us, however, far more probable that the name is but another form of Boece’s polypod ”, and, like it, is applied to the lobster. To judge from the frequency of the entries recording the purchase of oysters, these appear to have been considered as great a delicacy four hundred years ago as they are at the present day. According to

the same evidence, there must have been a considerable consumption of mussels, cockles, whelks, razor-fish, scallops, periwinkles, and limpets, and also of crabs and shrimps. And, finally, that dishes wholly unknown, at the present-day, on the tables of either rich or poor, frequently figured on that of royalty itself, may be inferred from the purchase of porpoises and seals for the larder. Various authorities, from treatises on the art of war to returns of commissariat expenses, testify to the extraordinary quantity of fish that was used for victualling troops and provisioning castles. We know that amongst the supplies delivered to the garrisons that Edward I quartered in the south of Scotland during the years 1299 and 1300, there were large stores of herring, which were bought by the last of 10,000 of stockfish, and of ling. In order to meet his own requirements, during this expedition, the same monarch was accompanied by some of the fishers attached to his household; and in his "Wardrobe Account" there is an entry for "four nets which were purchased for fishing- in the rivers and lakes of Scotland for the King's use". The amount of fish required in the large establishments of the nobility may be estimated from the fact that, in one year, the Breadalbane family laid in 420 salmon, 15,000 herring, and 30 dozen of "hard fish". In addition to this the numerous religious houses created a constant demand for the same commodity; and their chartularies abound in records of the provision that was made to meet it. We learn from them that David I gave the monks of the Isle of May exclusive fishery rights around their own shores; that he conferred on the community of Holy rood the tithe of his own share of the larger fish caught along the southern shore of the Forth, from the Avon to Cockburnspath; and that he made over to the monastery of Dunfermline every seventh one of the seals caught at Kinghorn, after his own tithe had been set aside. To his successor, Malcolm IV, the same house owed the remarkable grant of "the heads of porpoises caught in the Forth, except the tongues"; and that of Kelso of "the half of the fat of the royal fishes which might come into the Forth on either shore".

In some cases, the privileges conferred by the King did not involve the absolute surrender of his own rights. For instance, Alexander I expressly reserved them in the charter that entitled the monks of Scone to fish in the Tay, near which their house was situated. There were also restrictions as to space, for the measurement of which the stretch of water that could be fished by one net and one cobble was taken as the unit, and was itself called a "net". That explains what the chartularies mean when they record that David I gave two "nets" in the Tweed to the monks of Holy rood; that Malcolm IV granted two "nets" in the Tay and one "net in the Forth to those of Scone; and one in the Findhorn to those of Kinloss; and that King William allowed those of Arbroath a "net" in the North Esk and another "in the Tay which was called the Stocke".

It may be presumed that where "nets" were granted, the fishing was by means of the seine. Another contrivance consisted of the "yair which is described as " an enclosure stretching into a tideway, for the purpose of detaining the fish when the tide ebbs. The material of which it was constructed is indicated in the permit which the Earl of Lennox gave to the monks of Paisley, in 1273, authorizing them to take wood from his forests and stone from his grounds for the repair of their fishing yairs on the Leven. The grant of yairs, like that of nets, occurs frequently in mediaeval charters. Their extent was regulated by a statute of Alexander II which, by reason of its quaintness, has become famous. It was to the effect that the mid-stream should be left sufficiently wide for a well-fed swine of three years to be able to turn round in it without touching the yair with either snout or tail. Fishing by means of stell-nets, along the shelving seashore and near the mouths of rivers, appears to have been practised at a very early date. What he calls "ane uncouth maner of fisching" is described by Boece, and is stated by him to have been, in his day, peculiar to Moray. The people, he says, made a long basket, narrow-necked and wide-mouthed, with many stakes inside. Into this the fish threw themselves and could not get forth again; and as soon as the sea ebbed they were taken dry in the creels. If, as has been thought, this refers to "the contrivance of cruives and yairs", Boece could scarcely have been so unfamiliar with it as to call it uncouth, and to assign it to one special district. As regards rod-fishing, what, so far as we know, is the earliest mention of it, occurs in 1632, when the father of Duncan Campbell in Creitgarrow became caution for his son, that he should not " put out a wand on the water

of Tay”.The primitive way in which shell-fish were caught, is described by John Major. “In Lent, and in Summer,” he says, “at the winter and the summer solstice, people go in early morning from my own Gleghornie and the neighbouring parts to the shore, drag out the polypods and crabs with hooks, and return at noon with well-filled sacks. At these seasons the tide is at its lowest, and the polypods and crabs take shelter under the rocks by the sea. A hook is fastened to the end of a stick, and when the fish becomes aware of the wood or iron, it catches the same with one of its joints, thus connecting itself with the stick, which the fisherman then at once draws up”.In spite of Boece’s statement as to the number of continental fishing fleets that annually visited the North Sea, there is evidence to prove that foreigners, far from being welcome or even tolerated in Scottish waters, ran the risk of being treated like pirates. It may not be true that James V, having dispatched one of his ships of war to capture some Dutch fishermen who had ventured to fish within 28 miles of the mouth of the Forth, put the offenders to death, and sent a barrelful of their heads to Holland. But, the story was told by the Town-Clerk of Edinburgh to Secretary Coke, in 1630; and it illustrates the popular feeling of the time as regards fishery rights.

(LA Barbe, 1919)

HERITAGE AND ARTS | 11 August 2026

Bessie Bell And Mary Gray: The Evidence Behind Perthshire's Plague Ballad

Read online: <https://modern.scot/bessie-bell-and-mary-gray/>



FIRST PUBLISHED IN 2015

For centuries, Bessie Bell and Mary Gray have been remembered as two young Perthshire women who tried to escape the plague by hiding in the countryside, only to die together. Their grave is still marked beside the River Almond and their names survive in one of Scotland's best-known traditional ballads. But much of the familiar story was written down more than a century after the event, and modern research allows fact, tradition and later embellishment to be separated more carefully.

Bessie Bell and Mary Gray live more securely in Scottish memory than they do in the historical record.

Near the River Almond, west of Perth, a small enclosed grave site is still recorded by Scotland's National Record of the Historic Environment as "Grave of Bessie Bell and Mary Gray". The Ordnance Survey marked it as their grave and dated it to 1645. When surveyed in 1975, it consisted of a level area of stones enclosed by metal railings, although no inscription or date stone was then visible.

The place is real. The plague was real. The ballad is real. But almost everything between those three facts is more complicated.

The familiar story says that Bessie and Mary were daughters of neighbouring Perthshire landowners. When plague threatened Perth, they withdrew from society and built themselves a temporary shelter, a bower covered with rushes and heather, at Burn Brae near Lednock. They lived there in isolation until infection somehow reached them. Both died and were buried away from the ordinary parish graveyard.



That bare story is substantially what survives in the traditional ballad later catalogued by the great nineteenth-century folklorist Francis James Child as Child Ballad No. 201, "Bessy Bell and Mary Gray". The song is strikingly short. It gives the women, their bower, the arrival of the pest and their deaths. It says they had expected burial among their kin at Methven but instead lay elsewhere. It says nothing about a secret lover bringing provisions, contaminated jewellery, sexual relationships or any of the more elaborate explanations that later accumulated around the story.

The story told today is largely a combination of ballad and later oral tradition.

A note on the ballad: The line “to biek forenent the sin” has sometimes been misunderstood as referring to moral “sin”. In Scots, biek means to bask or warm oneself and forenent means facing or opposite; the final word is generally understood here as sun. The image is therefore of Bessie and Mary lying in the open at Stronach Haugh, facing the sun, rather than being punished for an unnamed offence.

201A.1 O BESSIE BELL and Mary Gray, They war twa bonnie lasses; They bigget a bower on yon burn-brae, And theekit it oer wi rashes. 201A.2 They theekit it oer wi rashes green, They theekit it oer wi heather; But the pest cam frae the burrows-town, And slew them baith thegither. 201A.3 They thought to lye in Methven kirk-yard, Amang their noble kin; But they maun lye in Stronach haugh, To biek forenent the sin. 201A.4 And Bessy Bell and Mary Gray, They war twa bonnie lasses; They biggit a bower on yon burn-brae, And theekit it oer wi rashes.

Listen: Ewan MacColl sings the traditional “Bessie Bell and Mary Gray”

For readers who would like to hear the older, much shorter form of the ballad, Ewan MacColl recorded Bessie Bell and Mary Gray (Child No. 201) as part of his work with the traditional Scottish and English ballad repertoire. His version is brief, stark and far removed from the later romantic embellishments that became attached to the story.

Listen here: <https://ewanmaccoll.bandcamp.com/track/bessie-bell-and-mary-gray-child-no-201>

One of the most important accounts was written on 21 June 1781 by Major George Barry, then proprietor of Lednock — roughly 135 years after the probable events.

Barry said local tradition identified Mary Gray as the daughter of the laird of Lednock and Bessie Bell as the daughter of the laird of nearby Kinvaid. He was shown an old heap of stones in Dronach Haugh which local people told him was their burial place. The tradition described the women as beautiful and said that “an intimate friendship subsisted between them”. It also introduced the young man familiar from later retellings: an admirer said to have loved both women and to have brought them provisions while they were in hiding.

According to that tradition, it was through him that the infection reached them.

But that is tradition, not an eyewitness account.

There is no evidence establishing that a young man caused their deaths, and the traditional ballad itself does not mention him. Later stories grew still more elaborate, including one in which contaminated jewellery carried the infection. Those additions tell us a great deal about the way folklore develops, but very little that can safely be stated about what happened to two women in seventeenth-century Perthshire.

Even the year became confused

Barry’s account dated the plague to 1666.

That cannot be right.

The National Library of Scotland records that the Great Plague of 1665–67 never reached Scotland, largely because the Scottish authorities imposed restrictions on trade and quarantine measures against affected countries. Scotland’s devastating final major plague epidemic instead occurred in the mid-1640s.

The grave tradition consequently came to be associated with 1645, the date eventually placed on Ordnance Survey mapping and retained in the historic-environment record.

Modern research makes the chronology more interesting still.

A major peer-reviewed study published in PLOS ONE in 2024 reconstructed Scotland's last great plague epidemic between 1644 and 1649, combining documentary, archaeological and genetic evidence. The researchers confirmed *Yersinia pestis*, the bacterium responsible for plague, in human remains associated with the Scottish epidemic. Their historical reconstruction records plague west of Perth by December 1645 but identifies an exceptionally severe outbreak in Perth itself during the summer of 1646, with mortality estimated at around 3,000 people.

The safest conclusion is therefore not that Bessie and Mary definitely died in one particular year.

It is that the legend fits the very real catastrophic plague epidemic which engulfed central Scotland in 1645–46. The traditional 1645 date is plausible, but the surviving evidence does not allow the deaths of two particular women to be dated with certainty.

The lairds present another problem

Modern digitisation of seventeenth-century tax records gives us something earlier generations of writers could not easily check.

The 1649 valuation roll for Perthshire, preserved by Scotland's People, records a Patrick Gray as holding part of Lednock in Methven parish. That is only a few years after the traditional date of the story and gives genuine documentary support to the presence of the Gray family at Lednock. It does not prove Mary Gray's identity or relationship to Patrick, but the family-and-place association is at least grounded in a contemporary record.

Bessie Bell is more difficult.

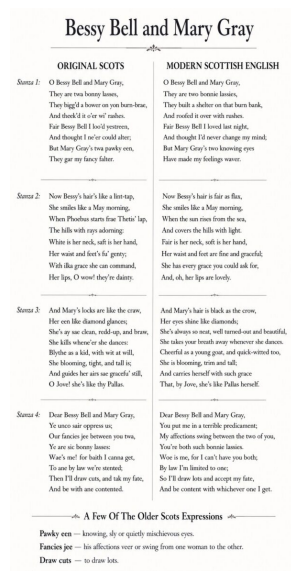
The same 1649 valuation records Sir William Stewart, not a Bell, as proprietor of Kinvade in Moneydie parish, valued at £440 Scots.

That does not prove there was no Bessie Bell connected with Kinvaid in 1645. Ownership might have changed, the family relationship remembered by tradition may have been different from formal ownership, or details may simply have become confused over the following century.

But it does mean that the frequently repeated statement that Bessie Bell was straightforwardly "the daughter of the Laird of Kinvaid" should be treated as tradition rather than established genealogy.

That is perhaps the most intriguing result of returning to the original records. The Gray side of the story leaves a faint documentary footprint. The Bell side, at least in the 1649 land record, does not fit quite so neatly.

And then Allan Ramsay changed the song



Another source of confusion is that there are effectively two Bessie Bell and Mary Gray songs.

The traditional Child ballad is the tragic one: two women build a bower, plague reaches them and they die.

The poet Allan Ramsay subsequently used their names and the familiar opening for a different song concerned largely with their beauty and a man's difficulty choosing between them. The English Broadside Ballad Archive attributes a surviving broadside of that version to Ramsay, while ballad scholarship treats Ramsay's composition separately from Child Ballad 201.

By 1792, “Bessy Bell and Mary Gray” was sufficiently established to appear in David Sime's Edinburgh Musical Miscellany, a copy of which is now digitised by the National Library of Scotland.

Over time, the plague tragedy, Ramsay's romantic verses, local oral tradition and later retellings became entangled.

The words above are Allan Ramsay's expanded eighteenth-century version of Bessy Bell and Mary Gray. The traditional Scottish air associated with the song can also be heard online, giving a sense of how Ramsay's verses would have sounded when sung rather than read on the page.

Listen: Bessie Bell and Mary Gray — traditional Scottish
[airhttps://www.contemplator.com/scotland/bessie.html](https://www.contemplator.com/scotland/bessie.html)

That helps explain why modern accounts can sound extraordinarily certain about details which the earliest ballad never supplies.

Were Bessie and Mary lovers?

There is no reliable historical evidence that allows that question to be answered.

Their story has acquired a modern queer interpretation, partly because two young women withdrew from society and lived together and partly because Barry's eighteenth-century account describes an “intimate friendship” between them.

But those facts are insufficient to establish a sexual relationship.

Nor does the later story of a male admirer establish that either woman was romantically involved with him.

The historical position is much simpler: we do not know.

The surviving traditional ballad does not describe a sexual relationship between the women. It does not describe a sexual relationship with the young man either. The young man is absent from the ballad altogether.

It is entirely legitimate for later generations to interpret folklore in new ways. What cannot responsibly be done is convert an interpretation into biography.

Nor do we know how the infection reached them

Modern medicine tells us that bubonic plague is caused by *Yersinia pestis* and is principally associated with

infected rodent fleas. Pneumonic plague can also spread between people through respiratory droplets. Seventeenth-century Scots, of course, knew none of this; the cause of plague was not scientifically established until the end of the nineteenth century.

If Bessie and Mary were real women who isolated themselves during the epidemic, several routes of infection would have been possible.

Food, clothing, visitors, rodents or fleas could all have breached their isolation.

There is no surviving evidence which tells us which did.

The young man carrying the pest to their bower remains an exceptionally effective piece of storytelling because it transforms an invisible disease into a human tragedy. He may have existed. He may also have been folklore's solution to the obvious question of how two isolated women became infected.

The grave remains

The strongest physical link between landscape and legend is still the quiet enclosure beside the Almond.

Historic Environment Scotland's record does not authenticate the occupants through archaeological excavation. Rather, it documents a burial place which local tradition, nineteenth-century maps and historical accounts have associated with Bessie Bell and Mary Gray for generations.

Modern plague research also cautions against some of the darker stories once attached to their burial.

The 2024 study of Scotland's final plague epidemic found that mass burial was often a practical response to overwhelming mortality, but also found examples of plague victims receiving normal and careful burial treatment. It found no simple basis for assuming that Scots universally regarded plague victims as people to be dishonoured after death.

There is therefore no historical basis for claiming that Bessie and Mary were excluded from consecrated ground because of homosexuality, sexual misconduct or some particular "sin".

The ballad remembers that they did not lie where they expected to lie.

Why is another part of the silence.

And perhaps that is where the story should remain.

Bessie Bell and Mary Gray may have been two real young women whose deaths were remembered long enough to become song. A Gray family was genuinely established at Lednock within a few years of the great Perth plague. A place long identified as their grave still survives. Scotland really was devastated by plague when tradition says they lived, and modern genetic research has now confirmed the disease responsible for that final seventeenth-century epidemic.

Beyond that, certainty thins rapidly.

The lover, the contaminated necklace, the precise family histories and modern theories about their sexuality belong to the centuries of storytelling laid over the original tragedy.

What survives underneath is simpler and considerably more powerful.

Two young women tried to put distance between themselves and an epidemic.

They built a shelter in the countryside.

The plague reached them anyway.

And nearly four centuries later, Scotland still remembers their names.

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HERITAGE AND ARTS | 13 August 2026

The Men Who Came to Take Lewis

Read online: <https://modern.scot/the-men-who-came-to-take-lewis/>

In 1598, James VI granted a group of Lowland landowners sweeping rights over Lewis. They came with soldiers, craftsmen and plans for a plantation. The island already had inhabitants, its own rulers and no intention of quietly changing hands.

In the summer of 1598, a group of Scottish gentlemen acquired an extraordinary document from the Crown. It gave them rights over Lewis, its lands, fisheries, harbours and resources, and authority to establish

towns, markets and churches there.

The document existed on paper. Lewis existed in another world entirely.

For generations the island had been associated with the Macleods of Lewis, or Siol Torcaill. Their lordship had been weakened by bitter internal disputes, competing claims of inheritance and violence within the family. Into that instability came men from the other side of Scotland who believed Lewis could be reorganised, settled and made profitable.

They became known as the Fife Adventurers.

James Browne, writing more than two centuries later in his *History of the Highlands and of the Highland Clans*, described their intentions with unusual directness. He wrote that reports of Lewis's fertile soil encouraged barons and gentlemen of Fife to attempt to take possession of the island. Their declared aim, he said, was to “civilize” its inhabitants; Browne believed their underlying purpose was to establish a colony which would supplant the existing population.

The surviving government record shows that the language of “civility” was not Browne's invention.

On 28 June 1598, James VI and the Scottish estates ratified a contract disposing of Lewis and neighbouring territories to the group of adventurers. The Crown's document portrayed the islanders as resistant to royal authority and “civility”, while describing Lewis as exceptionally rich in grain, fisheries and other resources. The agreement explicitly anticipated increasing Crown rents and customs. It gave the new proprietors extensive rights over fisheries, minerals, ports, markets, burghs and local government.

The economic purpose sat alongside the political one. Lewis was to be made governable, taxable and commercially productive according to the priorities of the state.

The names attached to the contract included Patrick Leslie, commendator of Lindores; James Learmonth of Balcomie; Sir James Anstruther; James Spence of Wormiston; Sir James Sandilands of Slamannan; Captain William Murray; John Forret of Fingask and others, together with Ludovic Stewart, Duke of Lennox.

Browne dates the royal gift to 1599, while the surviving parliamentary contract establishes that the arrangement had been concluded the previous year. His account then describes what happened when the legal theory met the island itself.

The adventurers assembled soldiers and craftsmen and sent them west with what Browne called everything necessary for a “plantation”. On Lewis they began constructing houses and, according to his account, created a “small but handsome town”.

There is a tantalising archaeological echo of that story. The Stornoway Historical Society, drawing on work by the Western Isles Archaeological Service, records a tradition that the Fife Adventurers built a small town at Stornoway at the beginning of the 17th century. Little or nothing clearly attributable to it now survives. Later destruction, rebuilding and the construction of Cromwellian fortifications have obscured the early town beneath the Stornoway that followed.

The settlement did not proceed peacefully.

Lewis was already fractured by struggles within the Macleod family, and the adventurers entered those divisions rather than confronting a single united political authority. Modern research has stressed that the episode cannot be reduced neatly to Lowlanders against Highlanders. Gaelic families also manoeuvred for land, influence and commercial advantage, while the Macleod lordship itself had become politically vulnerable.

Neill Macleod became one of the settlers' most determined opponents.

Browne records that, after relations between Macleod and Sir James Spence broke down, a party was sent to capture Neill during the night. Macleod was prepared. Browne says the attackers were met with such force that 60 were killed and the survivors driven back to their camp.

Tormaid Macleod then returned to Lewis. Browne says Neill and the islanders rallied around him. Their forces attacked the adventurers' position, burned the fort, killed many of the settlers and captured their commanders. The prisoners were eventually released after promising that they would not return.

They returned.

The Fife settlers secured another royal commission and assembled support from surrounding territories. Browne records that the Earl of Sutherland sent men to assist them. Faced with the new force, Tormaid surrendered and was taken south to put his case directly before James VI.

His argument went to the heart of the affair.

According to Browne, Tormaid told the king that Lewis was his inheritance and that James had been wrongly persuaded that the island was his to dispose of. He blamed that decision for the bloodshed which had followed.

The settlers nevertheless found Lewis increasingly expensive to hold. Browne describes men who had exhausted their fortunes, others who had died, and a colony struggling to supply itself while facing continuing resistance. Eventually, he writes, they abandoned Lewis and returned to Fife.

Yet another attempt followed.

Sir George Hay and Sir James Spence became involved in what Browne explicitly calls the “colonization of the Lewis”. A fresh force arrived to plant a settlement and capture Neill Macleod. Meanwhile, Lord Kintail, whose Mackenzie family had its own designs on Lewis, publicly assisted the Crown-backed expedition while, Browne alleges, secretly helping Macleod intercept its supply vessel. Without provisions, the expedition collapsed. The remaining fort was subsequently burned.

The eventual winners were not the Fife Adventurers but the Mackenzies.

Modern scholarship places the Fife plantation between 1598 and 1609 and the subsequent Mackenzie

acquisition within a much broader struggle over state authority, commerce and the western seaboard. Aonghas MacCoinnich's research argues that the Mackenzies themselves became sophisticated planters and commercial operators, dealing with Scottish and European interests and complicating the old picture of commercially minded Lowlanders confronting supposedly backward Highland Gaels.

Browne's story ends more violently. Neill Macleod withdrew with a small group to the offshore rock of Berrissay. Browne says he held out there for years before his opponents gathered the relatives of the defenders onto another rock threatened by the rising tide. Faced with the prospect of their families drowning, the men surrendered. Neill was later delivered to the Privy Council in Edinburgh and executed in 1613.

By then, the experiment begun by the Fife gentlemen had failed. The Macleods of Lewis had also lost their old position. The Mackenzies emerged with control of the island, and Stornoway entered another phase of its history. Local historical research dates Mackenzie acquisition to around 1610.

What survives most clearly from the Fife Adventurers is not their settlement.

It is the paperwork.

The royal contract still records the fisheries, revenue, ports, markets and “civility” that government expected Lewis to provide. Browne's old volume preserves the story of the men who arrived to put those ambitions into effect and of the islanders who refused to make it easy.

Four centuries later, the little colonial town has largely disappeared beneath Stornoway. The document granting the island away has proved more durable than the settlement it was supposed to create.

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FEATURED | 9 August 2026

American Coffee and Other Emergencies

Read online: <https://modern.scot/american-coffee-and-other-emergencies/>



I was back at the wee fish shop somewhere between Thurso and Scrabster last Thursday, minding my own business, as I generally am when other people happen to be speaking loudly enough for me to hear them. Effie was standing by the haddock having a very quiet conversation with Elspeth. It was one of those conversations conducted at precisely the volume required to make every woman within twelve feet immediately interested. They both stopped talking

when they saw me coming. I looked at Effie. I looked at Elspeth. “Well, spit it out,” I said. “What’s the matter?” Effie sighed. “Elspeth has a situation.” I put my haddock down. There are situations, and there are situations. A situation can mean anything from somebody having reversed into a sheep trailer to a family member arriving from Glasgow with luggage. “This one is temporary,” Effie added. Elspeth looked as though she was taking some comfort from that fact. Her husband’s brother, it turned out, had married an American woman many years ago and moved to the United States. Every few years they came back to Scotland for a visit. This time they had arrived with their three children, aged seven, five and two. “The children are fine,” said Elspeth. This surprised me, because three visiting children under eight are not usually introduced as the reassuring part of a story. “It’s her.” The American wife. Now, I have met many perfectly agreeable Americans. They are generally cheerful people, and they seem to possess a touching belief that everything can be improved by making it larger and providing free refills. This particular American, however, had apparently never quite accepted that other countries were not failed versions of America. She had already expressed dissatisfaction with the size of the refrigerator, the width of the roads, the amount of ice available in drinks, the absence of screens on the windows and the washing machine, which she claimed took “literally forever”. “It takes two hours,” Elspeth said. I nodded. Apparently this constituted forever in America. But the real trouble was coffee. She had asked for coffee on the first morning. Elspeth made her instant. There was a silence at this point in the fish shop. Even I understood that something unfortunate had occurred. “She looked at it,” said Elspeth, “like I’d dissolved gravy granules in the cup.” Effie covered her mouth. Elspeth offered tea. The woman did not drink tea. Eventually she announced that she desperately needed Starbucks. There is no Starbucks in Thurso. This fact did not improve matters. And so her husband and his brother (Elspeth’s husband) somehow found themselves driving all the way to Inverness because one grown woman wanted a particular cup of coffee. I stared at Elspeth. “You drove to Inverness for coffee?” “I didn’t,” she said quickly. “The men did.” That was something. They returned several hours later, whereupon Elspeth’s husband informed his brother that this particular humanitarian relief operation would not be repeated. “We are not driving to Inverness again because your wife wants coffee,” he said. Quite right too. The American wife pouted for a while and then refused coffee altogether. She would not drink tea. She drank water with an expression suggesting political imprisonment. Then she discovered Amazon. Two days later a box arrived from a catering supply company in England. Inside was a commercial filter coffee machine. Not a little domestic coffee maker, mind you. This was the sort of apparatus one expects to find in a hotel breakfast room beside forty Danish pastries and a conference on agricultural drainage. “It takes up half my counter,” said Elspeth. “How much coffee does it make?” “A whole jug.” “How big a jug?” “Big.” This was not terribly scientific, but her hands described something approaching a municipal reservoir. The American woman

explained that it was merely a normal American-sized coffee pot. "She makes the whole thing every morning," Elspeth said. "And drinks it?" "All of it." Effie blinked. "By herself?" "Every drop." Then came the electricity. The machine brewed the coffee and afterwards sat there keeping it hot for hours. Elspeth said she had gone outside one morning and looked at the electricity meter. "It was spinning so fast I thought it might lift off." I said that somewhere south of the border, a power station had probably received an emergency telephone call. Effie said the electricity was undoubtedly having to come all the way up from England. We considered this perfectly plausible. Two more women had now stopped pretending to examine the fish. Then Rhona, who had been quietly studying a tray of smoked haddock, said she had once drunk coffee from one of those machines. We all turned. "At an office party in Edinburgh," she said. "Years ago." "Well?" Rhona thought about it. "Best coffee I ever had." There was another silence. This altered the nature of the discussion considerably. Elspeth's visitors were leaving the following Saturday. Rhona suggested that perhaps, after they had gone, we might all call round on Sunday. "Just to help you tidy," she said. Naturally. Nobody was proposing a coffee party. We were simply responsible Highland women offering practical assistance to another woman after a demanding family visit. If, during that assistance, a commercial coffee machine happened to require testing, it would have been irresponsible not to test it. So the following Sunday we arrived. All five of us. Various husbands were told we were going round to help Elspeth get the house back in order. This was true. Technically. We had the kitchen straight within twenty minutes. Then somebody looked at the commercial coffee pot. "Well," said Effie. "Well," said Rhona. Elspeth fetched the instructions. We gathered around them. Fill the water tank. Easy enough. Put the glass jug on the lower hotplate. Fine. Place a filter in the basket. Done. Then came the coffee. "How much?" Elspeth disappeared into the pantry and returned holding a large plastic coffee scoop. "Eight of these." Six women looked at the scoop. "Eight?" "Yes." "That's half the bag." "I watched her." "You asked her?" "No. I watched her from the pantry." There are moments when friendship requires you not to ask unnecessary questions. "She put eight in," Elspeth said. "I counted." So we put eight in. One. Two. Three. By five, Effie was shaking her head. At eight, the filter basket looked as though we were preparing peat for winter. The instructions said to switch on the lower hotplate and then press the brewing button. We did. There was a hiss. Then a gurgle. Then another, rather more authoritative gurgle. Within minutes, dark coffee began pouring into the jug. The smell filled the kitchen. "Oh," said Rhona. That was all she said. We stood around the machine like six crofters witnessing electricity for the first time. When the jug was full, we carried everything to the table. Coffee. Sugar. Single cream. Biscuits, because we were not savages. Elspeth had observed that her sister-in-law took two spoons of sugar and cream, so several of us did the same. I poured mine. It was black enough to have its own gravitational field. I added cream. It became approximately the colour of polished walnut. We tasted it. Nobody spoke for a moment. "Well," Effie eventually said. "Strong," said Rhona. "Very." "But good." "Very good." I took another sip. There was no denying it. It was excellent coffee. Far better than instant, though this was perhaps setting the bar at ankle height. We finished our cups. There was still half a jug left. "It would be a shame to waste it," someone said. I cannot now remember who. This is how history conceals its villains. So we had another cup. Six women. Two cups each. Twelve cups of coffee from one brew. "My goodness," said Effie. "You really could serve twelve people with that." Elspeth nodded. "She drank the whole pot herself." We stopped. "Twelve cups?" "Not all at once. She started first thing and kept coming back. Cup every half-hour or so." Rhona stared into her empty cup. "Every half-hour?" "All day." About ten minutes later, I became aware of my heartbeat. There are pieces of information one should receive before consuming two cups of commercial-strength American coffee. Effie placed her hand on her chest. "Is anybody else's heart going a bit... enthusiastic?" Rhona nodded very quickly. "I can hear mine." "You can't hear your heart." "I can now." Elspeth stood up. "I feel marvellous." She began wiping the counter. The counter was already clean. She wiped it again. Then the cupboard doors. Then the refrigerator. Effie announced that she was finally going to reorganise her airing cupboard. "I've been meaning to do it since 2019." "You could do it now," said Rhona. "I could." "You absolutely could." Within another five minutes we had developed several ambitious plans. Rhona proposed repainting her hall. Effie decided the loft could be cleared before supper. One of the

others thought we ought to organise the village Christmas lights properly this year. Someone suggested forming a community gardening group. Rhona thought we should all learn Italian. By the time I had finished my second cup, somebody had suggested reopening the railway, and I believe I had volunteered to rebuild part of a stone wall. At one point all six of us were talking simultaneously and understanding one another perfectly. Then Elspeth's husband came home. He stood in the kitchen doorway. We all turned towards him at once. "HELLO," said Effie. He took half a step backwards. His eyes moved around the table. Six cups. Empty sugar bowl. Commercial coffee machine. Six women sitting unusually upright. "What's happened?" "Nothing," Elspeth said. She was polishing the toaster. "You seem... excited." "I've had coffee." "So I see." "It gives you a bit of pep." "A bit?" Elspeth stopped polishing. "I'm thinking of cleaning the garage." Her husband looked at me. I gave him what I hoped was a reassuring smile. He did not appear reassured. Then Effie's husband arrived to collect her. She met him at the door already wearing her coat. "You're looking cheerful," he said. "I've decided we're doing the loft." He stared at her. "Today?" "We've wasted enough time." He looked past her at the rest of us. "What have you lot been drinking?" "Coffee," I said. He looked at the big empty coffee pot. By four o'clock we had all gone home. Mr Gunn was reading when I arrived. "How was Elspeth?" "Much better." "House sorted?" "Completely." I took off my coat. Then I noticed a mark on the skirting board. I fetched a cloth. Mr Gunn watched me clean the skirting board. Then the door frame. Then, because I was already there, the hall table. By six o'clock I had cleaned the kitchen cupboards, rearranged the pantry, washed every windowsill downstairs, written three letters I had been putting off since Christmas and seriously considered moving the sofa. At half past midnight, I was lying in bed beside Mr Gunn staring at the ceiling. He was sound asleep. My eyes were wide open. My heart was still conducting military exercises. I realised that the American woman may not have been difficult after all. She may simply have been consuming twelve cups of coffee every day and couldn't go cold turkey.

Modern Scot - Distinctly Scottish

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