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A Grangemouth Factory Is Trying to Make Omega-3 Without Catching Fish

Read online: <https://modern.scot/a-grangemouth-factory-is-trying-to-make-omega-3-without-catching-fish/>



SEPA is considering a permit for a new industrial process at Earls Road in Grangemouth that would produce omega-3-rich material from microalgae grown using by-products from Scotland's whisky industry. The company behind it, MiAlgae, says the process can replace marine-derived omega-3 used in pet food and aquaculture while recycling millions of litres of distilling by-product. The project has already received public funding and is part of the attempt to rebuild Grangemouth's industrial economy after the refinery era. The environmental regulator is now deciding the

conditions under which it can operate.

On 3 September, the Scottish Environment Protection Agency opened a 28-day consultation on its draft decision for a new industrial authorisation at Earls Road in Grangemouth. The applicant is MiAlgae Ltd, an Edinburgh biotechnology company established in 2016. The activity for which permission is sought is described in regulatory language as the production of organic chemical omega-3 fatty acids.

The production method begins somewhere less obvious: Scotland's whisky industry.

MiAlgae uses nutrient-rich co-products from whisky distillation as feedstock for microalgae grown inside fermentation vessels. The algae accumulate docosahexaenoic acid, or DHA, one of the principal long-chain omega-3 fatty acids normally associated with marine food chains. The resulting material can then be dried and sold as an ingredient for pet food and aquaculture feed.

The industrial logic is circular. One Scottish industry produces large volumes of organic material after distillation. Another industry requires omega-3-rich feed ingredients that have traditionally depended in part on fish caught at sea. MiAlgae is attempting to connect the two.

The permit is about industrial production, not a laboratory experiment

MiAlgae has been developing the process for nearly a decade, but the Grangemouth facility represents a move towards commercial-scale production.

The company broke ground on the site in December 2025. It said the new plant would increase its omega-3 production by more than ten times and process 33.1 million litres of whisky-industry by-products annually when operating at full scale. The company also said the expansion could replace enough marine-derived omega-3 to avoid the use of billions of wild fish each year.

Those figures are company estimates rather than measurements produced by SEPA. The regulator's role is different. It is assessing whether the industrial activity can be authorised under the Environmental Authorisations (Scotland) Regulations 2018 and what operating conditions should apply.

SEPA says such authorisations are intended to prevent or minimise environmental harm, reduce the consequences of accidents and require sustainable use of resources. Its current consultation concerns the proposed permit conditions and draft decision rather than the commercial case for the plant.

Omega-3 does not originate in fish

The project depends on a biological fact that is often hidden by the way omega-3 products are marketed.

Marine omega-3 ultimately originates lower down the food chain. Certain microalgae naturally produce long-chain omega-3 fatty acids. Small marine organisms consume the algae; fish consume those organisms or other fish; omega-3 then accumulates through the food web.

Industrial fish oil traditionally shortens that process by harvesting oily fish such as anchovies, sardines and other small pelagic species and extracting the oil from them.

Fermentation offers another route. Instead of allowing the fatty acids to move through the marine food chain before they are harvested, microalgae can be cultivated directly under controlled industrial conditions.

That principle is not unique to MiAlgae. Algal omega-3 is already produced internationally for supplements, infant nutrition, animal feed and aquaculture. The unusual Scottish element lies in the feedstock used to grow the algae.

Whisky leaves behind far more than spirit

Distilling converts only part of the raw material entering a whisky plant into alcohol. The process also produces large volumes of liquid and solid co-products containing organic material and nutrients.

Some of those materials already have established uses. Distillers' grains can be used in animal feed, while other residues may enter energy, agricultural or waste-treatment systems.

MiAlgae's process uses liquid whisky co-products as a nutrient source for fermentation. The company says the material supports microalgal growth without requiring the same quantities of refined ingredients that would otherwise have to be produced specifically for the process.

The company also says that water emerging from the system can be cleaned and returned to the watercourse.

The environmental calculation therefore extends beyond the algae themselves. It includes what happens to the whisky co-product if MiAlgae does not use it, what energy the fermentation process consumes, how the water is treated, what emissions arise from industrial operation and how the final ingredient compares with conventional fish-derived omega-3 over its full life cycle.

The claimed reduction in fish use is very large

MiAlgae has previously estimated that one tonne of its algal product can displace the use of up to 30 tonnes of wild-caught fish.

That estimate has appeared repeatedly in public statements from both the company and Scottish Enterprise. The proposed Grangemouth expansion has consequently been presented as a way of reducing fishing pressure while producing an ingredient required by another important Scottish industry: aquaculture.

Salmon farming depends upon feeds containing proteins, oils, vitamins and minerals. Historically, fishmeal and

fish oil formed a much larger proportion of those feeds than they do today. Vegetable proteins and oils have increasingly replaced marine ingredients, but long-chain omega-3 remains nutritionally important in salmon production and in the final nutritional composition of farmed fish.

That creates a continuing demand for DHA and related fatty acids even as the industry attempts to reduce dependence on wild fisheries.

Algal production is one possible answer because it removes the need to obtain those fatty acids through harvested fish.

Grangemouth is part of the story

The location is not incidental.

Grangemouth is undergoing one of the most consequential industrial transitions in modern Scotland. The closure of conventional oil refining at the site removed a major part of an industrial system that had developed over generations around petroleum, chemicals, port infrastructure and processing.

The Scottish and UK governments are now directing public money towards new industries capable of using the skills, land and infrastructure concentrated around the town.

MiAlgae is one of those projects.

In December 2025, Scottish Enterprise announced £1.5 million from the Scottish Government's Grangemouth Just Transition Fund for the company, matched by a further £1.5 million from the UK Government. The funding was intended to support construction of the commercial-scale bioreactor facility.

Scottish Enterprise said the project could create up to 130 direct jobs in Grangemouth during the following five years and another 180 elsewhere in Scotland.

The Scottish Government has separately presented MiAlgae as part of the diversification of the Grangemouth industrial cluster beyond its traditional dependence on oil refining and petrochemicals.

The business began as a university project

MiAlgae was founded by Douglas Martin while he was studying at the University of Edinburgh in 2015–16. The company was incorporated in September 2016.

Its early development received backing from investors including Equity Gap, the Scottish Investment Bank and the University of Edinburgh's Old College Capital. A £500,000 investment announced in 2018 helped fund a pilot plant, while a further £1 million investment announced in 2020 supported commercialisation and expansion.

The company subsequently developed larger-scale facilities in East Lothian before moving towards the Grangemouth project.

Companies House records show continued capital raising. Share allotments were filed in March and April 2026, with the company remaining active and registered in Edinburgh.

The development path therefore follows a familiar Scottish biotechnology model: university research or student entrepreneurship, early public and private investment, pilot-scale development and then an attempt to move into commercial manufacturing.

The environmental case is more complicated than “waste into food”

The basic proposition is attractive because it joins two existing industrial streams. Whisky co-products become feedstock for algae, and algae become an alternative source of omega-3.

Industrial biotechnology, however, still requires physical infrastructure.

Fermentation vessels require energy to operate, control temperature and move material. Biomass must be separated and processed. Water has to be managed. Cleaning chemicals may be required. Organic material can create biological oxygen demand if released untreated. Industrial sites also carry risks associated with storage, accidental discharge, odour and waste handling.

That is why the Grangemouth plant falls within SEPA’s environmental authorisation regime.

The regulator is not being asked to certify the company as sustainable. It is deciding whether the proposed industrial process can operate within environmental limits and, if authorised, the conditions required to control its emissions and resource use.

SEPA’s draft decision therefore provides a different kind of evidence from company announcements. It establishes that MiAlgae has reached the point at which its technology must be considered as an industrial chemical-production activity rather than solely as a biotechnology innovation.

Replacing fish oil does not automatically remove pressure from fisheries

The environmental effect also depends upon how the product is used.

If algal omega-3 directly replaces fish oil derived from wild-caught fish, the substitution can reduce demand for that marine resource. If it instead allows total feed production to grow while fish-oil demand remains unchanged, the effect is different.

Markets for fishmeal and fish oil are also interconnected. Many fisheries produce both products from the same catch, and trimmings from seafood processing are increasingly used alongside whole fish as raw material.

The relationship between one tonne of algal product and an avoided quantity of wild fish therefore depends upon assumptions about oil yield, species, alternative uses and market response.

MiAlgae’s frequently cited estimate of 30 tonnes of fish saved for each tonne of algae is its own conversion estimate. It provides a measure of the scale the company believes its technology can reach, but the actual environmental effect will depend upon substitution in the market.

The plant connects whisky to salmon farming without either industry meeting physically

The arrangement is economically unusual because the two ends of the system are geographically separate.

Whisky production is distributed across Scotland, including Speyside, the Highlands, the islands, the Central Belt and the south. Salmon farming is concentrated mainly along the west coast, Highlands and islands. Grangemouth sits between them as an industrial processing location with established road, port, chemical and logistics infrastructure.

Whisky-derived material can therefore be transported to a central biotechnology plant, converted into a

high-value ingredient and then supplied into feed chains serving aquaculture or pet-food markets.

The value of the original material changes substantially along that route. A low-value industrial co-product becomes feedstock for fermentation. Fermentation produces specialised biomass containing DHA. That biomass becomes a commercial nutritional ingredient.

The process is an example of the kind of industrial transformation policymakers have sought when discussing a Scottish circular economy: retaining material within productive use while increasing its economic value.

The next question is whether the process works at industrial scale

Many biotechnology companies succeed technically at laboratory and pilot scale but encounter different problems when production increases.

Fermentation has to remain biologically consistent across much larger vessels. Inputs have to arrive in predictable quantities and quality. Contamination has to be controlled. Energy, water and processing costs can change the economics. Customers require consistent nutritional specifications across large volumes.

The Grangemouth plant is intended to address that transition.

MiAlgae has said the facility will increase output more than tenfold. It has also designed the technology as a modular system capable, in principle, of being reproduced near other sources of distilling co-products.

If that model works commercially, Grangemouth could become the first large installation in a network rather than a single unusual factory.

Scotland already produces both ends of the chain

The project also exposes an unusual feature of Scotland's industrial geography.

Scotland is one of the world's largest whisky-producing countries and one of Europe's principal producers of farmed Atlantic salmon. One industry generates a nutrient-rich co-product. The other requires large quantities of nutritionally specialised feed.

Those industries have developed largely separately.

MiAlgae's Grangemouth plant attempts to create a commercial link between them by inserting biotechnology between the distillery and the feed manufacturer.

That does not mean every whisky co-product can or should be diverted to algae production. Existing markets already use distillery residues, and the economics of collection and transport vary considerably by location.

The scale claimed for the Grangemouth facility nevertheless provides a first indication of what such a link could look like commercially. The company says 33.1 million litres of whisky co-products could pass through the plant each year.

SEPA's decision will come before the technology's larger claims can be tested

The current environmental consultation closes on 1 October 2026.

SEPA has already drafted proposed permit conditions and a decision document. Comments received during the

consultation will be considered before the regulator reaches its final decision.

If authorisation is granted, the company will be required to operate within those conditions. SEPA can subsequently review the permit where necessary.

The larger claims surrounding the project will take longer to establish.

Whether the plant creates the projected jobs will depend upon commercial growth. Whether it processes the stated volume of whisky co-products will depend upon production. Whether algal omega-3 displaces large quantities of fish oil will depend upon customers buying and substituting it at scale.

The environmental authorisation marks the point at which those claims begin to move from development plans into industrial operation.

Grangemouth was built around industries that transformed raw materials at enormous scale. For much of the twentieth century those materials were crude oil and petrochemical feedstocks.

The proposed MiAlgae operation starts with something considerably less valuable: liquid left behind by whisky production.

The company's commercial proposition is that fermentation can turn that material into an ingredient valuable enough to compete with oil extracted from fish caught at sea.

SEPA is now deciding under what environmental conditions that proposition can be tested at industrial scale.

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ENVIRONMENT | 10 September 2026

In 2017, Scotland Had 61 Salmon Stocks Rated Good. For 2027, Only 22 Are Left

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Scotland's latest assessment of wild Atlantic salmon shows a ten-year deterioration across much of the country. For the 2017 angling season, 61 of Scotland's assessed salmon stocks were classed as being in good conservation status. For 2027, only 22 are proposed to remain in that category. Over the same period, the number classed as poor has risen from 75 to 123. The

surviving strength is increasingly concentrated in a smaller number of larger east-coast rivers.

The Scottish Government assesses 173 wild Atlantic salmon stocks each year. In most cases, a stock corresponds to a single river, though some assessment areas combine several rivers or cover a Special Area of Conservation. The latest figures, published in August for the proposed 2027 angling season, place 123 of those 173 stocks in poor conservation status, 28 in moderate status and 22 in good status.

The pattern is markedly different from a decade ago. In 2017, 61 stocks were classed as good, 37 as moderate and 75 as poor. By 2022, the number of good stocks had fallen to 37. It fell again to 29 in 2023, recovered slightly to 32 in 2024 and 31 in 2025, then stood at 32 for 2026. The proposed 2027 assessment reduces that figure to 22.

The poor category has moved in the opposite direction. From 75 stocks in 2017, it rose to 101 in 2022, 113 in 2023, 112 in 2024, 118 in 2025 and 115 in 2026. The proposed figure for 2027 is 123.

The annual conservation categories are not descriptions of whether salmon are present or absent. They measure the probability that a stock will meet an internationally agreed conservation limit over a five-year period. A stock is rated good where the probability is at least 80 per cent. Moderate covers probabilities between 60 and 80 per cent. Poor means the probability is below 60 per cent.

The conservation limit is intended to represent the number of spawning fish required to sustain the stock. A river placed in the poor category is therefore not necessarily empty of salmon. It is a river or assessment area in which the evidence indicates insufficient confidence that enough fish are returning and surviving to maintain the stock at the required level.

The national picture is not evenly distributed

The most unusual feature of the latest assessment appears when the number of stocks is compared with the number of fish.

Only 13 per cent of Scotland's assessed salmon stocks are proposed to be in good conservation status for 2027. Yet those stocks are estimated to contain about 73 per cent of all Scottish salmon.

The reason is geographical. Several of Scotland's larger east-coast rivers continue to support much larger salmon populations than many of the smaller rivers around the west coast, islands and other parts of the

country. A relatively small number of large stocks therefore account for most of the national population.

The result is a salmon population that can appear stronger when measured by individual fish than when measured by the number of rivers capable of meeting their conservation limits.

That concentration also changes the character of national resilience. A country with many healthy rivers distributes ecological strength across different catchments. A country in which most fish are concentrated within a smaller group of large rivers depends increasingly upon the performance of those systems.

The decline is visible even inside stocks that remain classified as good

The conservation categories also conceal another trend. Between 2011 and 2025, Scottish Government scientists found significant and consistent declines in estimated salmon numbers in 76 stocks.

Those declines occurred across all three conservation categories. Some rivers still classified as good are therefore declining from a relatively stronger starting position.

Among another 70 stocks where the statistical analysis did not detect a significant, consistent decline, 57 nevertheless contained fewer salmon in 2025 than in 2011. A further 27 stocks showed no consistent pattern over the period.

The annual conservation grade and the direction of travel therefore measure different things. A river can remain above its conservation threshold while carrying fewer fish than it did previously. Another can remain in poor condition without showing a further statistically consistent decline because its population has already fallen to a low level or varies substantially between years.

The long-term national decline is larger than the ten-year grading series

Scotland's salmon records extend much farther back than the current conservation-status system.

Estimates of adult salmon returning to Scottish coastal waters begin in the early 1970s. At that time, around one million salmon were estimated to return to Scotland in a year. In recent years, that estimate has fallen to around 300,000.

The decline in returning fish did not initially produce an equivalent fall in the number surviving to spawn. Fisheries management changed substantially over the same period. Commercial exploitation was reduced, coastal net fisheries were closed to salmon, and catch-and-release became increasingly common among rod fisheries.

In the early 1970s, more than 400,000 salmon could be removed annually by net and rod fisheries. By the early 2020s, removals had fallen to a few thousand. In 2025, 98 per cent of salmon caught by rod were released, and no salmon were taken by coastal net fisheries.

That reduction in deliberate killing allowed a larger proportion of returning fish to reach spawning grounds even while the total number arriving at Scotland's coast was falling. Estimated spawning numbers rose for several decades and reached a high point of around 670,000 in 2010.

Since then, spawning numbers have fallen as well. The Scottish Government's latest estimate places them at around 250,000 in recent years.

The 2025 salmon catch was the lowest ever recorded

The fishery statistics for 2025 provide another measure of the same decline.

Scottish rivers recorded 28,020 salmon caught by rod in 2025, the lowest figure since national records began in 1952. The total was 68 per cent of the average for the preceding five years.

Rod fishing effort also declined, with 192,859 reported rod days compared with 203,199 in 2024. Lower fishing effort can reduce catches, so catch totals cannot be treated as a direct count of the salmon population. The government nevertheless states that the 2025 results are consistent with the wider decline in wild salmon returning to Scotland.

The reported rod catch had exceeded 111,000 salmon as recently as 2010.

Scotland has progressively removed fishing pressure

Government policy has increasingly restricted the killing of wild salmon as stock condition has deteriorated.

The Conservation of Salmon (Scotland) Regulations introduced the current annual stock-assessment system in 2016. Poor-status rivers are subject to mandatory catch-and-release, meaning salmon can still be fished for but cannot legally be retained.

Spring salmon receive additional national protection because their numbers have fallen particularly sharply. It is illegal to retain salmon caught before 1 April.

The closure of coastal net fisheries and widespread voluntary and statutory catch-and-release have greatly reduced direct exploitation. Those measures have altered one pressure Scotland can control directly.

The continued decline after that reduction is one reason current salmon policy extends far beyond fishing regulation.

Much of a salmon's life occurs beyond Scotland's rivers

Atlantic salmon begin life in freshwater, migrate to sea as juveniles, spend part of their adult growth phase in the North Atlantic and then return to freshwater to spawn, usually in the river from which they originated.

Survival at sea has deteriorated across the North Atlantic. The International Council for the Exploration of the Sea reports that adult return rates have declined since the late 1980s and are now at historically low levels for many stocks, including after large reductions in marine fisheries.

Scottish Government analysis attributes part of the long-term decline to changes in ocean conditions associated with climate change. Changes in sea temperature can alter marine food webs, prey availability, growth rates and the energetic cost of survival.

The Scottish decline therefore forms part of a wider North Atlantic pattern rather than an isolated national event. Estimates across the North Atlantic show adult returns falling from about five million salmon in the early 1970s to fewer than 1.5 million in recent years.

That does not make local Scottish conditions irrelevant. Salmon must survive both marine and freshwater phases of their life cycle. A fish weakened by conditions at sea still has to enter a river, negotiate barriers, reach spawning habitat and produce juveniles capable of surviving their own migration back to the ocean.

Scottish rivers contain their own pressures

The Scottish Wild Salmon Strategy identifies a long list of freshwater and coastal pressures. These include water temperature, altered river flows, barriers to migration, habitat degradation, pollution, predation, disease, parasites, invasive species, marine development and interactions with aquaculture.

Many of these pressures overlap.

High water temperatures can increase physiological stress. During the warm summer of 2018, around 70 per cent of Scottish rivers experienced temperatures capable of stressing salmon. Loss of riverside woodland can remove shade and increase local temperatures, while changes in rainfall can alter flows during migration and spawning.

Dams, weirs, bridge structures and culverts can obstruct or delay migration. Scotland's salmon implementation plan identified 84 active barriers, 94 historic barriers and another 66 barriers outside the principal licensing system for review or action. Some barriers are associated with hydroelectric generation, public water supply, distilleries, transport infrastructure and older industrial works.

The government has also identified water quality as a pressure. Agricultural runoff, forestry practices, sewage discharges and other forms of pollution can affect oxygen levels and habitat condition in rivers where salmon spawn and juveniles develop.

Scotland has been trying to rebuild freshwater habitat

The Wild Salmon Strategy Implementation Plan, published in 2023 and running to 2028, brings together actions across government agencies, fisheries organisations, land managers and environmental bodies.

Work includes removing or easing barriers, restoring river habitats, planting riverside trees for shade, improving water quality, monitoring disease, controlling invasive species and improving scientific data.

By 2024, government reported that eight barriers had been eased for fish passage, more than 100 were under assessment and 69 were progressing towards further action. Peatland restoration and riverside woodland programmes were also being used partly to improve catchment condition.

The Nature Restoration Fund has committed at least £65 million across wider biodiversity restoration, with river and fisheries organisations among the recipients of project funding.

The latest salmon classifications show that those interventions are operating against a continuing national and international decline.

Some rivers are changing category faster than others

The proposed 2027 assessment does not simply move the national totals.

Twenty-one stocks are proposed to move into a worse conservation category compared with 2026. Three are proposed to improve.

That annual movement reflects a system based on rolling evidence rather than a permanent designation. Stocks can shift between good, moderate and poor as new data on returning adults, catches, fish counters and biological samples enter the assessment.

The government uses rod-catch information, fish counters and samples of salmon scales to estimate how

many adults are returning, how large and old they are, and how many are likely to survive to spawn. Those estimates are then compared with the conservation limit for each stock.

The proposed classifications were subject to statutory consultation during August and early September. Final regulations will determine where salmon can legally be retained during the 2027 season.

A smaller number of large rivers now carries most of Scotland's salmon

The national figures produce a striking geography.

Seventy-one per cent of assessed stocks are proposed to be classed as poor. Yet most individual salmon remain within the much smaller good-status group.

The larger east-coast river systems account for much of that remaining abundance. Their size, tributary networks and habitat allow them to sustain populations far larger than many smaller coastal and island rivers.

The national population therefore depends increasingly upon a relatively limited number of strong catchments at the same time as declines are being recorded across rivers in all conservation categories.

Scotland has already removed most legal harvesting pressure from its weakest stocks. Commercial coastal salmon fishing has ended. Catch-and-release rates are close to universal. Poor-status rivers cannot retain salmon at all.

Those measures have reduced the number of fish killed by fisheries to a fraction of historic levels.

The 2027 assessment shows what has happened while those protections have been increasing. In the first year of the present grading system, 61 stocks met the threshold for good conservation status. Ten years later, the proposed number is 22.

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ECONOMY | 10 September 2026

Scotland's Businesses Are Beginning to Worry More About Missing Customers Than Rising Costs

Read online: <https://modern.scot/scotlands-businesses-are-beginning-to-worry-more-about-missing-customers-than-rising-costs/>



Falling demand has become the most commonly cited main concern among Scottish businesses for September 2026, narrowly ahead of energy prices. At the same time, the share of firms reporting rising turnover has fallen sharply from the previous month and from a year earlier. The figures suggest that part of Scotland's business problem may be shifting from the cost of producing goods and services towards the difficulty of selling enough of them.

For much of the recent inflationary period, the central problem facing Scottish businesses was relatively easy to describe. Energy became more expensive. Fuel became more expensive. Wages rose. Materials and imported goods cost more. Companies attempted to absorb those increases, raise prices or reduce other expenditure.

The latest Scottish business data show another pressure moving to the front.

In the Scottish Government's Business Insights and Conditions Survey for the period 3 to 16 August, businesses with at least 10 employees were asked to identify their main concern for September. Falling demand was cited by 14.9 per cent. Energy prices followed at 14.6 per cent. A further 13.4 per cent reported no concerns.

The percentages are close, but the pattern is not new to September. In the previous survey, falling demand had already been the leading concern for August, cited by 17.4 per cent of firms, ahead of worker shortages at 11.9 per cent. In June, when businesses were asked about July, falling demand was again the most commonly identified concern, at 13.4 per cent.

The result is a sequence rather than a single unusual survey response. Scottish businesses have been identifying insufficient demand as their principal concern for three consecutive monthly outlook periods.

Turnover is weakening at the same time

The turnover figures move in the same direction. In July, 23.6 per cent of Scottish businesses reported that turnover had increased compared with the previous month. In June, the equivalent figure had been 32.2 per cent. In July 2025, it had been 30.6 per cent.

Another 42.3 per cent reported that turnover was unchanged in July, while 25 per cent said it had fallen. The figures cover currently trading businesses with at least 10 employees and a presence in Scotland.

Those figures do not establish that Scotland is entering a recession or that demand is collapsing across the whole economy. They do show that fewer businesses are reporting month-on-month growth in turnover, while concern about demand has moved repeatedly to the top of the survey.

That combination is different from a business environment in which companies are mainly struggling to contain input costs while customers continue buying at the same rate.

Energy and fuel remain major pressures

Cost pressures have not disappeared.

An estimated 76.4 per cent of Scottish businesses said they were very or somewhat concerned about energy prices. In accommodation and food services, the share rose to 81.7 per cent. In transport and storage, it was 79.7 per cent.

Fuel prices generated similarly widespread concern. Across Scottish businesses, 73.5 per cent reported being very or somewhat concerned about rising fuel prices. The figure reached 86.8 per cent in construction and 90.7 per cent in transport and storage.

The two pressures can coexist. A business can face higher operating costs while also finding it harder to increase sales. That position is more difficult to manage than cost inflation alone because raising prices can itself weaken demand.

Only a minority expect to raise prices

The latest survey also provides evidence on how businesses are responding.

In July, 26.3 per cent of firms reported that the prices of goods or services they bought had increased compared with June. Only 11.2 per cent said they had increased the prices of the goods or services they sold.

For September, 11.8 per cent expected to raise their own selling prices. Among businesses considering price increases, labour costs were the most commonly cited factor at 30.1 per cent, followed by energy prices at 27.1 per cent.

That leaves a large group of firms facing higher costs without necessarily passing all of those increases directly to customers.

For a business with strong demand, that can sometimes be managed through pricing power. For a business already worried about customer demand, the calculation is different. An increase intended to protect margins can reduce sales further.

The problem is different across sectors

Scotland's economy is not one market. A manufacturer exporting specialist equipment faces different demand conditions from a restaurant, retailer, construction contractor or logistics company.

The survey data already show that energy and fuel pressures are concentrated unevenly. Accommodation and food services remain particularly exposed to energy costs, while transport and storage is highly sensitive to fuel. Construction carries its own combination of materials, labour and fuel exposure.

Demand weakness can also arrive through different routes. Household-facing businesses depend heavily on disposable income. Construction depends on investment and financing conditions. Exporters depend on foreign demand and exchange rates. Business-to-business firms depend partly on whether their customers are expanding or delaying expenditure.

A national figure for falling demand therefore conceals several different economic problems.

Scotland has moved through several different business shocks since 2020

The present position follows a sequence of disruptions rather than a single event.

The pandemic interrupted trading and supply chains. Reopening produced shortages and rapid shifts in consumer demand. Russia's invasion of Ukraine contributed to a sharp rise in European energy costs. Inflation spread through food, transport, labour and materials. Interest rates then rose as the Bank of England attempted to control inflation.

By 2026, the inflation problem has moderated from its peak, but financing conditions remain tighter than before the pandemic and businesses are still operating with higher absolute costs.

Energy prices have also returned as a major concern. The latest Bank of England survey shows UK businesses still expecting selling prices to rise by around 3.8 per cent over the coming year, while wage growth expectations remain around 3.4 per cent.

At the same time, economists surveyed by Reuters expect the Bank of England to keep Bank Rate at 3.75 per cent through the remainder of 2026 and at least into the middle of 2027, with higher energy prices limiting the scope for early reductions.

For Scottish businesses carrying debt, financing investment or relying on discretionary consumer spending, that leaves little prospect of a rapid return to the conditions that existed before the inflationary cycle.

Demand can weaken before employment does

One reason the business survey is useful is that it captures expectations before some effects appear in headline economic statistics.

A company that expects weaker demand does not immediately close or dismiss workers. It can first reduce overtime, delay recruitment, postpone investment, cut stock orders or defer expansion. Those decisions can accumulate before appearing clearly in employment or GDP figures.

The Scottish survey still shows more optimism than pessimism about the next year. In August, 27.7 per cent of firms expected their overall business performance to increase over the next 12 months, while 9.8 per cent expected it to decrease.

The business environment is therefore not one of uniform contraction. Most companies are not reporting expectations of decline.

The change lies elsewhere: fewer businesses are reporting rising turnover, and insufficient demand has repeatedly become the most common single concern.

Small changes in demand can have wider effects

Businesses respond to demand through purchasing as well as selling.

A restaurant serving fewer customers buys less food and drink. A construction company with fewer projects orders fewer materials. A manufacturer receiving fewer orders uses less freight and may delay equipment purchases. A retailer expecting weak sales reduces stock.

One company's reduction in expenditure therefore becomes another company's reduction in demand.

This is one of the ways a slowdown can spread through an economy without any individual business initially experiencing a dramatic event.

The same mechanism works in reverse during expansion. Rising orders lead companies to buy more stock, employ more people, invest in equipment and commission services from other firms.

Scotland's business base has limited protection from weak domestic demand

Exports can provide one route around a weak domestic market, and Scotland has internationally competitive sectors including food and drink, energy, engineering, financial services, life sciences and technology.

But much of the Scottish business population serves customers within Scotland or the wider UK. Retail, hospitality, construction, personal services and large parts of professional and business services depend substantially on domestic spending and investment.

Where household budgets remain constrained, the effect can therefore travel directly into company turnover.

That is particularly relevant after several years in which higher housing, food, energy and borrowing costs have absorbed a larger share of household income.

A cost problem and a demand problem require different responses

When input costs rise while demand remains strong, companies can sometimes protect themselves through price increases, efficiency savings or longer-term contracts.

When demand weakens, reducing costs does not itself create more customers.

Businesses can attempt to find new markets, export, develop new products, reduce prices or increase marketing. Governments can influence demand indirectly through public spending, investment, taxation and the broader conditions affecting household income and business confidence.

None of those responses is immediate.

The Scottish survey is therefore showing an economy in which businesses remain highly concerned about energy and fuel costs while simultaneously reporting a different constraint on growth: not enough demand for what they sell.

That combination is visible most clearly in the turnover data. In June, almost one business in three reported higher turnover than in the previous month. By July, the figure had fallen to fewer than one in four.

The next Scottish BICS release is scheduled for 10 September and will extend the series by another survey wave.

That will show whether the pattern is beginning to reverse or whether falling demand is becoming a more persistent feature of the Scottish business economy.

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TRANSPORT | 10 September 2026

Scotland Is Studying a Railway From Tweedbank to Carlisle. The Victorian Route It Would Follow Has Been Partly Dismantled for 57 Years.

Read online: <https://modern.scot/scotland-is-studying-a-railway-from-tweedbank-to-carlisle-the-victorian-route-it-would-follow-has-been-partly-dismantled-for-57-years/>



A new public survey opened in September as Scottish Borders Council and WSP began developing the case for extending the Borders Railway through Hawick to Carlisle. Up to £10 million has been committed to the business-case and feasibility process. The work begins with a route that once existed in full: the Waverley line from Edinburgh to Carlisle. Since its closure in 1969, bridges have been demolished, railway land has been reused and roads and development have occupied parts of the old formation. The current study must determine whether a twenty-first-century railway

can still be assembled through that landscape.

For the first time in years, the proposal to return trains to Hawick and reconnect the Scottish Borders with Carlisle is moving through a funded formal business-case process rather than remaining primarily a campaign or political commitment.

Scottish Borders Council has appointed WSP to carry out the transport appraisal and prepare a growth prospectus for the Tweedbank–Hawick–Carlisle corridor. The work forms the first stage of the Strategic Outline Business Case. In September, the council opened a new survey seeking views from residents, businesses and organisations across the Borderlands on the transport and economic opportunities that improved connections might create.

The UK and Scottish governments have committed up to £10 million to the business-case and feasibility programme through the Borderlands Inclusive Growth Deal, with £5 million allocated by each government. Turner & Townsend was appointed as project manager in 2025, and WSP won the principal appraisal and economic work packages in summer 2026.

The process does not begin from the assumption that a railway must be built. The Strategic Outline Business Case is required to examine the transport problems of the corridor and compare potential solutions before a preferred option can move to more detailed feasibility work. A railway extension to Hawick and Carlisle is therefore being tested against other possible transport interventions.

Yet the railway option has one unusual feature: much of its route already exists in historical memory, engineering records and fragments on the ground.

The railway reached Hawick before it reached Carlisle

The old Waverley Route was built in stages. Railways reached Hawick from Edinburgh in 1849. The more

difficult southern extension towards Carlisle followed after the North British Railway secured powers for the Border Union Railway in 1859.

The engineers faced a formidable landscape. South of Hawick the railway climbed through the Southern Uplands towards Whitrope Summit before descending through Liddesdale towards the English border and Carlisle. The route required steep gradients, continuous curvature, tunnels, embankments and substantial viaducts.

The line eventually formed a complete railway between Edinburgh and Carlisle and served settlements including Galashiels, Melrose, St Boswells, Hawick and Newcastleton. It also connected the textile towns of the Borders with markets and transport networks to both the north and south.

Its difficult geography later became part of the argument against it. The route was longer and more demanding than competing north–south railway corridors and carried relatively limited traffic across the most sparsely populated southern sections.

The Waverley Route closed to passengers in January 1969 following the railway rationalisation of the 1960s. The closure severed direct rail access to much of the Borders and left Hawick, one of the largest towns in Scotland without a railway station, dependent principally on road transport.

The railway was not preserved for an easy return

Closure did not leave a complete empty railway waiting to have rails put back on it. Track was lifted and railway property was disposed of. Structures were removed or allowed to deteriorate. Roads were altered. Former railway land was absorbed into new uses.

At Hawick, the old railway station and part of the infrastructure around the River Teviot disappeared into later redevelopment. The station had stood on a curved alignment associated with the crossing of the river. The old railway embankment south of the town was subsequently removed, while later road and commercial development occupied parts of the former railway corridor.

The original route south of Hawick also lost structures. Historic Environment Scotland records Stobs Viaduct, around four miles south of Hawick, as a surviving listed structure from the Border Union Railway, but other viaducts between Stobs and Hawick no longer survive. The former railway landscape is therefore uneven: substantial Victorian engineering remains in some locations while gaps have opened elsewhere.

Farther along the route, Whitrope Tunnel survives, as do other bridges and earthworks. At other points roads, private uses and later development have altered the original formation. The condition of surviving structures would have to be assessed against modern railway requirements rather than judged simply by whether the masonry remains standing.

The proposal therefore involves something different from reopening a recently mothballed railway. More than half a century has passed since the through route closed.

The first Borders Railway showed how much can change after closure

Scotland has already confronted this problem on the northern part of the Waverley Route. The railway between Edinburgh and Tweedbank reopened in September 2015 after being closed for nearly half a century.

Much of the rebuilt Borders Railway followed the historical alignment, but not all of it could. Parts of the old track bed had disappeared beneath later roads and development. At Falahill, for example, the A7 had been

straightened across the former railway formation, requiring a new alignment when the railway returned.

The new line also had to satisfy modern standards that its nineteenth-century predecessor had never been designed to meet. Stations required contemporary accessibility arrangements. Road crossings had to be reconsidered. Signalling, telecommunications, drainage, structures and safety systems were rebuilt for a modern railway.

The result was not a restoration in the heritage-railway sense. It was a new railway constructed partly along the geography of an old one.

The southern extension would face the same problem over a much greater distance and in more difficult country.

Hawick is the first major engineering and economic test

From Tweedbank, an extension would first have to reach Hawick. That section would reconnect one of the principal towns left without rail service after the 1969 closure.

The old Waverley alignment passed through Melrose and St Boswells before following the Teviot valley towards Hawick. Parts of that corridor have changed substantially since railway closure. The Melrose bypass, for example, occupies part of the former railway route through the town.

A modern alignment therefore cannot be assumed simply by tracing the nineteenth-century railway on an old map. The business-case process must establish which parts of the original corridor remain usable, where deviations may be necessary and what land would have to be acquired.

Hawick itself presents another constraint. The town grew around a narrow river valley, and the old railway crossed and recrossed difficult ground through substantial engineering. Later redevelopment has removed some of the structures that once carried the route through the town.

The engineering choice is consequently linked to the service choice. A railway terminating at Hawick could require a different station and alignment from one designed from the outset to continue south towards Newcastleton and Carlisle.

South of Hawick, the railway enters the most difficult country

The historical route from Hawick towards Carlisle was one of the more demanding main-line railways built in Britain. It climbed from Hawick towards Whitrope through gradients approaching 1 in 70 and then descended through the hills towards Riccarton Junction and Newcastleton.

The route depended upon the shape of the river valleys because nineteenth-century railway engineers had to find a practical path through the Southern Uplands without the tunnelling and earthmoving techniques available to modern infrastructure projects. The resulting railway was curved and steep, characteristics that affected operating costs and train performance throughout its life.

A modern railway could reuse much of that geography while still having to decide whether nineteenth-century alignment standards remain suitable. Higher speeds, modern freight requirements, accessibility, electrification, drainage and resilience can all alter what appears technically preferable.

The old line also crossed numerous local roads. Many historical level crossings would be unlikely simply to return in their original form. Bridges, road diversions or other solutions may be required where modern road and rail safety standards conflict with the former arrangement.

The railway is being studied as an economic corridor, not only a transport line

WSP has been commissioned to produce two connected pieces of work. The first is the transport appraisal, which will identify the transport problems and develop a shortlist of potential interventions. The second is a growth prospectus examining the economic opportunities that improved transport could support across the Borderlands.

That structure reflects the economic case the railway will ultimately have to make. A long rural railway cannot be justified solely by the number of people currently travelling between individual towns. Its business case may depend on whether better transport changes employment access, investment, housing, tourism, education and the geography of the wider regional economy.

The September survey is intended partly to collect that evidence from residents, businesses and organisations along the corridor.

The present Borders Railway provides a working comparison. Since opening between Edinburgh and Tweedbank in 2015, it has carried more than 13 million passenger journeys. The reopening restored rail access to communities in Midlothian and the central Borders and created new stations at places including Galashiels and Tweedbank.

The southern extension would serve a different geography. Population becomes thinner beyond Hawick, particularly through the country towards Newcastleton and the border. The case for continuing all the way to Carlisle must therefore demonstrate benefits beyond simply extending an existing commuter railway.

Carlisle would change what the railway is for

A line terminating at Hawick would principally connect the town northwards towards Galashiels and Edinburgh. A line continuing to Carlisle would become a through railway between two national networks.

Carlisle sits on the West Coast Main Line and provides onward connections towards Glasgow, Manchester, Birmingham and London, as well as railways into Cumbria and northern England. Reconnecting the Borders to Carlisle would therefore create a southern gateway that the existing railway to Tweedbank does not provide.

That possibility also changes the operational question. A through route could potentially carry services and traffic whose origin and destination lie beyond the Borders themselves. It could have diversionary or network-resilience value during disruption on other north–south routes, although any such role would depend upon line capacity, journey times and the technical standard ultimately chosen.

The original Waverley Route competed with other Anglo-Scottish railways. A restored route would enter a railway system in which the West Coast and East Coast main lines already perform the principal long-distance functions between Scotland and England.

The business case will therefore have to define what a third corridor through the Borders would contribute that those routes do not.

The project is being studied while the existing line changes technology

The northern Borders Railway is itself undergoing another transition. Scotland is developing electrification infrastructure intended to support new battery-electric rolling stock on the route. A new feeder station at Tweedbank forms part of that programme.

That creates a technical question for any extension. A railway designed now would not necessarily reproduce the diesel operation with which the Borders Railway opened in 2015. Power supply, partial electrification and battery operation could influence the design of the next section from the beginning.

The railway therefore sits at the intersection of two different periods of infrastructure. Its geography comes from a Victorian route built through the Southern Uplands in the nineteenth century. Its future traction system may rely upon twenty-first-century battery and electric trains.

£10 million is buying a decision, not a railway

The Borderlands funding commitment has sometimes been discussed as though government has already funded the extension. It has not. The £10 million is available for the business-case and feasibility process needed to determine whether a project should proceed and, if so, what form it should take.

The work is expected to proceed through three stages. The Strategic Outline Business Case examines the transport problem and possible solutions. An Outline Business Case would then develop a preferred option in greater detail, including cost, design, risk and value for money. A Full Business Case would be required before construction contracts and final funding arrangements could be approved.

The current project remains at the first of those stages.

Even the route is therefore not yet fixed. Campaigners have long proposed following much of the original Waverley alignment, and surviving railway land makes that an obvious starting point. The formal appraisal must still examine alternatives and establish whether the railway itself performs better than other transport options.

The landscape now contains the consequences of the 1969 closure

The present study involves not simply whether Scotland should build a railway, but whether it can reconstruct a transport corridor that the country dismantled more than half a century ago.

When the Waverley Route closed, safeguarding a complete future railway corridor was not the governing assumption. Track was removed, structures disappeared and land was reused. The decisions belonged to a period in which railway contraction was expected to be permanent and road transport was expanding.

The consequences have accumulated for 57 years. A road built across a track bed, a demolished bridge, a commercial development or a changed river crossing may each appear small in isolation. When a railway is reconsidered, every alteration becomes part of the engineering cost of returning it.

The September 2026 survey therefore begins at a point considerably earlier than construction. WSP is helping Scottish Borders Council determine what transport problem the corridor now has, what intervention could address it, and what economic change that intervention might support.

If rail emerges as the preferred answer, the project will not amount to simply reopening the old Waverley Route. Too much has happened to the corridor since January 1969.

Its surviving viaducts, tunnels, cuttings and embankments provide the skeleton of an earlier railway. Between them are the accumulated physical decisions of the following 57 years. The business-case process now has to establish how much of that Victorian railway can become part of a modern one, where a new route would have to depart from it, and what rebuilding a railway from Tweedbank through Hawick to Carlisle would actually require.

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TRANSPORT | 10 September 2026

Edinburgh Is Preparing to Spend Up to £2.9 Billion on Its Next Tram Expansion

Read online: <https://modern.scot/edinburgh-is-preparing-to-spend-up-to-2-9-billion-on-its-next-tram-expansion-the-northern-half-may-be-paused-before-it-begins/>



Edinburgh councillors are being asked on 10 September to decide whether the city should advance the next stage of its tram expansion. The full north–south scheme from Granton to the Royal Infirmary and BioQuarter is currently estimated at between £2 billion and £2.9 billion, depending on the route chosen through north Edinburgh. Yet the council’s own work has exposed substantial difficulties on both northern options. The result is that the southern section towards the Royal Infirmary may advance first while the Granton section is paused.

Edinburgh’s next tram decision is not simply about

whether the city wants more tram lines. It is about whether a transport project conceived as a single north–south corridor can still be delivered as one project after engineering, environmental and public-acceptability problems emerged along the northern half.

The proposed route would run from Granton through the city centre and then south towards the Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh and the BioQuarter. Beyond the hospital, longer-term options include connections towards Shawfair and other parts of the city region. The scheme has been under development for several years, and a public consultation ran from August to November 2025. On 10 September 2026, the Transport and Environment Committee is due to consider the Strategic Business Case and decide whether work should move to the Outline Business Case stage.

The current cost range is substantial. City of Edinburgh Council says the full north–south scheme is presently estimated at between £2 billion and £2.9 billion, depending principally on the choice of route between Granton and the city centre. Construction would not begin before 2028 at the earliest, and the council has not yet secured the funding required to build it.

The northern route has become the difficult part

Between Granton and the city centre, the council has examined two principal alignments. One would use the former railway corridor along the Roseburn Path before joining the existing tram line near Haymarket. The other would remain largely on-street, travelling through Orchard Brae and across Dean Bridge towards the west end of Princes Street.

The Roseburn route was initially identified as the preferred option in 2024. It was also the cheaper of the two northern options during the consultation stage, with an earlier estimate of approximately £350 million to £480 million for the Granton–city centre section, compared with £650 million to £850 million for the Orchard Brae alignment. The Roseburn option was also forecast to carry slightly more passengers.

Its difficulty lies in the land through which it would pass. Roseburn Path is already an established walking and cycling route running through a green corridor. Council technical work identifies tree loss, landscape change, ecological effects and reduced amenity as significant issues. Designing a tram line while retaining a high-quality walking and cycling route alongside it has proved one of the central problems of the scheme.

The Orchard Brae option avoids converting the Roseburn Path but creates a different set of engineering constraints. It would require trams to cross Dean Bridge, Thomas Telford's Category A listed structure over the Water of Leith. The council commissioned a dedicated structural assessment because the bridge was built in the 1820s, more than 170 years before modern tram loading was contemplated.

The route would also place tram infrastructure through streets with significant heritage constraints. Council technical work identifies heritage and streetscape effects as more prominent on the Orchard Brae and south-east corridors than on the Roseburn route.

The north of the scheme therefore presents a choice between two different categories of difficulty rather than a simple choice between a good route and a bad one.

The southern section is becoming a project in its own right

South of the city centre, the proposal is more settled. The intended route would run from the centre through North Bridge and South Bridge, continue through Newington, Minto Street and Craigmillar Park, pass Cameron Toll and then reach the Royal Infirmary and Edinburgh BioQuarter.

This corridor serves some of the largest concentrations of employment, education and health activity in the city. The University of Edinburgh has major sites along the route, while the Royal Infirmary and BioQuarter sit at the southern end. The council's strategic modelling also assumes the possibility of connecting onwards to Shawfair station, creating an interchange with the Borders Railway.

The emerging approach is therefore to consider whether the southern section can be advanced while the northern alignment remains unresolved. That would materially change the shape of the original project. Instead of constructing one continuous route from Granton to the BioQuarter, Edinburgh could proceed in phases, beginning with the section for which the engineering and public-acceptability problems are presently less severe.

A phased approach would also alter the financial problem. A southern-only line would require less capital than the full £2 billion to £2.9 billion scheme, but it would still represent one of the largest local transport investments attempted anywhere in Scotland.

The city is trying not to repeat its first tram experience

Any decision to build another major tram extension in Edinburgh sits beneath the history of the original tram project. The first scheme became synonymous with delay, contractual dispute and escalating cost. A project intended to run from Edinburgh Airport to Newhaven was reduced in scope, and the initial line opened only as far as York Place in 2014.

The subsequent extension from the city centre to Newhaven was delivered under a markedly different management structure. It opened in 2023 and extended the network through Leith to the waterfront. The council has repeatedly presented that project as evidence that lessons from the earlier failure were incorporated into later procurement, governance and construction arrangements.

The next expansion is considerably larger again. The council's own project material says construction would

likely be divided into sections, potentially separating Granton–city centre, the central section and the route from the city centre to the BioQuarter. That approach is explicitly linked to lessons from the previous tram projects.

The financial exposure is also different from the first tram era. Edinburgh now operates an established tram system carrying more than one million passenger journeys a month, rather than attempting to introduce an entirely new mode of transport. At the same time, the city is proposing infrastructure through some of its most congested and historically sensitive streets.

Edinburgh’s population growth is driving the transport case

The council’s case for expansion is tied closely to projected development. Granton Waterfront is one of the largest regeneration areas in the city, while the BioQuarter and south-east Edinburgh are expected to accommodate further employment, housing and institutional growth.

Edinburgh’s transport system is already constrained by the physical structure of the city. Much of the central road network passes through streets laid out long before modern traffic volumes. Bus services carry large numbers of passengers but remain exposed to congestion. The tram case rests partly on creating higher-capacity public transport along corridors where further growth is expected.

The council has therefore modelled not only present demand but future land use, housing and employment. Its strategic model has been updated repeatedly since the original tram business case, incorporating later development assumptions and changes to traffic, fares and public-transport patterns.

The proposed Shawfair connection is one example of how the project extends beyond Edinburgh itself. A tram link from the Royal Infirmary towards Shawfair could connect with the Borders Railway and the expanding settlements of Midlothian. Edinburgh is discussing longer-term regional mass-transit connections with Midlothian, East Lothian and SEStran.

The funding has not been settled

The largest unresolved issue remains money. City of Edinburgh Council says all potential funding sources would be examined during the later business-case stages, including support from the Scottish Government and Transport Scotland. No complete funding package currently exists for the full scheme.

That position matters because the current cost estimate is already between £2 billion and £2.9 billion before detailed design. The range partly reflects uncertainty over the northern route and the engineering treatment required along it. Costs will be refined if the project advances to an Outline Business Case.

At that stage, the council would have to identify a preferred option, develop costs in greater detail, assess value for money and establish how construction could realistically be financed. Further environmental, heritage and health assessments would also be required.

The council cannot therefore decide on 10 September to build a £2.9 billion tram line. It can decide whether enough evidence exists to spend further money developing the proposal towards that point.

The decision now concerns sequence as much as route

The northern difficulties have changed the character of that decision. Roseburn offers a comparatively direct off-street corridor but would transform a heavily used green route. Orchard Brae preserves the path but introduces higher costs, historic structures and more difficult street engineering. Neither has emerged

without substantial constraints.

The south-east route has not encountered the same binary route dispute. Its function is also closely tied to the Royal Infirmary, BioQuarter, university sites and future development in south-east Edinburgh.

The choice before Edinburgh is consequently moving towards sequence: whether to continue developing the full north–south scheme together, or advance the southern corridor while allowing more time to determine what should happen between Granton and the city centre.

The original ambition was a tram route crossing Edinburgh from north to south. The Strategic Business Case has now produced a more complicated outcome. The city has accumulated enough evidence to identify where the transport demand lies, but it has also accumulated enough engineering and environmental evidence to show why the northern half cannot simply be drawn across a map and built.

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INFRASTRUCTURE | 10 September 2026

Highland Councillors Were Asked on 9 September to Oppose a 173-Kilometre Power Line

Read online: <https://modern.scot/highland-councillors-were-asked-on-9-september-to-oppose-a-173-kilometre-power-line-across-the-highlands/>



Highland Council's planning officers have recommended a formal objection to one of the largest electricity transmission projects proposed in northern Scotland: a 173-kilometre 400kV overhead line from Spittal in Caithness to Beaulieu, with towers averaging about 57 metres high. Councillors began considering that recommendation at a joint meeting on 9 September. The project is already before a Scottish Government public inquiry, and the final decision rests with Scottish ministers rather than Highland Council.

On the morning of 9 September, councillors from across the Highland Council area assembled in Inverness to consider an electricity project that would run through seven council wards and across a substantial part of northern Scotland.

The proposal before the joint meeting of the council's North and South Planning Applications Committees was the Spittal to Beaulieu 400kV overhead line, promoted by Scottish Hydro Electric Transmission, which operates as SSEN Transmission. Planning officers presented councillors with a clear recommendation: raise an objection.

The proposed main line would extend for approximately 173 kilometres from a new substation at Banniskirk, near Spittal in Caithness, south through another proposed substation at Carnaig near Loch Buidhe, and onwards to a new substation at Fanellan near Beaulieu. It would be carried predominantly on steel lattice towers. Scottish Government records give an indicative support height of 57 metres.

The development extends beyond the principal 173-kilometre route. Approximately 18 kilometres of existing 132kV and 275kV overhead lines would require permanent diversion, together with temporary diversions and ancillary works needed during construction. The Scottish Government's Energy Consents Unit records the resulting total as approximately 191 kilometres of new overhead-line infrastructure.

It is a proposal on a scale rarely encountered through an ordinary planning application. It would create a new high-voltage electricity corridor extending from Caithness towards the Beaulieu area west of Inverness, crossing settlements, estates, agricultural and forestry land and landscapes containing environmental and cultural designations.

The council does not have the power to refuse it

The meeting in Inverness was not equivalent to the determination of an ordinary housing, commercial or industrial planning application. Highland Council does not possess the final power to approve or refuse the transmission line.

The application was made under Section 37 of the Electricity Act 1989. Major overhead electricity lines considered under that legislation are determined by Scottish ministers. Highland Council participates in the process as the relevant planning authority and statutory consultee.

SSEN has also requested that ministers direct that planning permission should be deemed to have been granted under Section 57(2) of the Town and Country Planning (Scotland) Act 1997 if consent for the electricity line is issued.

The council's position nevertheless has legal and procedural consequences. An objection from the relevant planning authority that is not withdrawn can require further examination before ministers determine a Section 37 application.

The Spittal–Beauly proposal is already in that process. The Scottish Government's Energy Consents Unit records the application as referred to the Planning and Environmental Appeals Division. The DPEA received the case on 21 May 2026 and has determined that it will proceed by inquiry.

Three reporters have been appointed. A pre-examination meeting took place on 11 August. The DPEA currently gives a target date of 6 May 2027 for its work on the case.

The council meeting on 9 September therefore took place after the national inquiry machinery had already begun.

The objection did not suddenly appear in September

Highland Council had already submitted an objection during the earlier consultation process. That allowed the authority to preserve its position within the statutory timetable while its officers continued their detailed assessment of an application extending across a very large part of the council area.

The significance of the September meeting lies in the detailed planning assessment now placed before elected councillors. The officers' report asked the joint committees formally to raise objection after examining the proposal against the development plan and the environmental, landscape, cultural and community effects identified through the application process.

The sequence is unusual but important to the chronology. The earlier objection belongs to the statutory consultation process. The 9 September meeting brought the substantive planning assessment before the councillors responsible for the affected areas while the Scottish Government inquiry was already under way.

The line is being proposed because Scotland's generation map has changed

The physical scale of the proposal is connected to a much larger change in the Scottish electricity system. Northern Scotland now contains, and is expected to contain, considerably more renewable generation than the transmission network built during the previous century was designed to accommodate.

Electricity infrastructure reflects the geography of the generating system from which it developed. During much of the twentieth century, Scotland relied upon a combination of large thermal power stations, nuclear generation and the hydroelectric network created across the Highlands after the Second World War. Transmission lines connected those generators with cities, industry and the wider British electricity system.

That generating map is being replaced.

Longannet coal-fired power station closed in 2016. Hunterston B nuclear station stopped generating in 2022. Torness is approaching the end of its operating life. Meanwhile, Scotland has constructed extensive onshore

wind generation and is preparing for substantially larger volumes of offshore wind around its northern and eastern coasts.

The north of Scotland consequently occupies an increasingly important position at the generating end of the British electricity network.

A wind farm in Caithness can produce large quantities of electricity in an area where local demand is comparatively small. That electricity has to be transported towards larger centres of consumption or towards other transmission connections capable of moving it farther through Britain.

Wind turbines alone cannot perform that task. Transmission capacity determines how much of the electricity generated in one place can be used somewhere else.

The renewable transition is also a transmission-building programme

Much of the visible debate around Scotland's energy transition has concerned wind farms, turbines, oil and gas production and new generating capacity. Behind that change sits another construction programme involving substations, converter stations, overhead lines, underground cables and subsea connections.

These assets do not generate electricity. They determine how electricity moves.

The Spittal–Loch Buidhe–Beauly project is one part of that programme. SSEN Transmission says reinforcement is required to accommodate the growth of renewable generation and move electricity through its network in northern Scotland.

The company is simultaneously developing other major transmission projects. Another proposed 400kV route would run from the Beauly area through Blackhillock and New Deer towards Peterhead. That project has itself been referred to the Scottish Government's inquiry system.

New substations and converter infrastructure are planned at several points across the network. Offshore wind development will add further demands as projects arising from the ScotWind leasing programme progress towards construction.

The result is not simply the replacement of individual old power lines. The high-voltage network across northern Scotland is being substantially reconfigured around a different pattern of electricity generation.

Beauly is becoming one of the principal junctions in that network

The southern end of the proposed line demonstrates the scale of the change. Beauly has long been an important point in the Highland transmission system. The developments now proposed around the area would considerably expand that role.

The Spittal line would terminate at a proposed new substation at Fanellan. Other transmission infrastructure would connect the Beauly area towards the north-east and into the wider British network.

The geography is logical from an electrical perspective. Existing transmission corridors and substations create points at which new capacity can connect with the established system.

For the communities surrounding those points, the same logic produces concentration. A place that already contains transmission infrastructure can become the location for additional substations, lines and associated development because the network is already there.

The towers would become part of the Highland landscape for decades

The main line would be supported predominantly on steel lattice towers averaging approximately 57 metres in height, according to the Energy Consents Unit case record. Individual structures would vary according to terrain, engineering requirements and crossings.

The towers are only the most visible component. Each requires foundations. Conductors must maintain clearances from the ground and other infrastructure. Construction requires access to tower positions, compounds and working areas. Existing transmission lines must be diverted where the new infrastructure intersects with them.

The associated substations are substantial pieces of industrial infrastructure in their own right.

A 173-kilometre route also encounters conditions that a compact development does not. Over its length it can cross peat, woodland, watercourses, farmland, archaeological landscapes, settlements, private water supplies and areas subject to environmental or landscape protection.

Route design consequently becomes a process of balancing competing constraints. Moving infrastructure away from one sensitive location can move it towards another.

The Highlands have experienced an energy transformation on this scale before

The closest historical comparison lies in the hydroelectric programme of the twentieth century. The North of Scotland Hydro-Electric Board was established in 1943 and proceeded to construct dams, reservoirs, tunnels, power stations, roads and transmission infrastructure across the Highlands.

Those works altered landscapes permanently. Valleys were flooded, roads moved and electricity infrastructure entered areas that had previously contained little large-scale industrial development.

The hydro programme had two related purposes. It generated electricity from Highland water resources and extended electricity supply to communities that private utilities had often considered uneconomic to connect. The resulting system also allowed electricity generated in the Highlands to serve demand elsewhere.

The institutional arrangements surrounding the present transmission programme are different. The electricity industry has been reorganised repeatedly since the hydro board was created, and transmission now operates within the regulated British electricity market.

The underlying geography remains recognisable. Northern Scotland possesses energy resources capable of producing electricity on a scale far beyond the demand of the population immediately surrounding them. Large infrastructure is required to move that electricity to other places.

Local opposition and national energy policy meet in the same planning case

The Spittal–Beauly application therefore places two forms of public policy against the same physical landscape.

At national level, Scotland and the wider British electricity system are seeking greater transmission capacity to accommodate renewable generation and replace an electricity network designed around an older generation system.

At local level, the infrastructure required to provide that capacity has physical consequences across the council area through which it passes.

Highland Council's planning assessment deals with the second part of that equation. SSEN's case for the development is built around the first.

The Public Local Inquiry provides the formal mechanism through which those positions, along with evidence from communities, landowners, statutory bodies and other participants, can be examined before ministers reach a decision.

Underground cables involve a different set of consequences

Calls for major transmission lines to be placed underground frequently arise during disputes over new overhead infrastructure. High-voltage electricity can be transmitted through underground cables, but the engineering is materially different.

Underground circuits require excavation, cable trenches, joint bays and construction access. High-voltage cables generate heat and must be designed and spaced accordingly. Faults can require excavation to locate and repair. Over long distances and difficult terrain, construction costs are generally substantially greater than for overhead lines.

Overhead lines leave a much greater permanent visual presence. Undergrounding replaces much of that visual effect with different construction, engineering, land and financial consequences.

The alternatives being considered in an infrastructure decision of this scale are therefore different forms of development rather than an impact-free version of the same project.

The inquiry is now examining more than a line on a map

The DPEA case file already contains hundreds of documents. The inquiry process can examine evidence concerning landscape and visual effects, cultural heritage, ecology, engineering, alternatives and other matters disputed between the parties.

Its reporters will ultimately provide findings to Scottish ministers. The decision on Section 37 consent will remain with ministers.

That leaves Highland Council in an unusual position. A line extending for 173 kilometres through its territory, accompanied by another 18 kilometres of permanent line diversions, can be opposed by the local planning authority without being capable of refusal by that authority.

The meeting that began on 9 September brought the council's detailed planning assessment of that infrastructure before elected members. The officers responsible for that assessment recommended objection.

The project now sits inside a national inquiry whose eventual recommendation will reach ministers in Edinburgh. The physical consequences, if consent is granted, will stretch from Caithness to Beaulieu.

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INFRASTRUCTURE | 10 September 2026

Scotland Is Rebuilding the Giant Highland Dry Dock Created for the North Sea Oil Age

Read online: <https://modern.scot/scotland-is-rebuilding-the-giant-highland-dry-dock-created-for-the-north-sea-oil-age/>



In 1975, workers began removing 1.8 million tonnes of Torridonian sandstone from a Highland mountainside to create a construction yard capable of building one of the largest objects Scotland had ever made. Half a century later, rock is being blasted at Kishorn again. A new £30 million procurement reveals the next stage of an expansion intended to turn infrastructure created for North Sea oil into a manufacturing base for floating offshore wind.

At Kishorn, on the eastern shore of a sea loch between Lochcarron and Applecross, approximately one million

tonnes of rock have been blasted and moved during the past year. Part of the material has been used to create 8.5 hectares of new land beside a dry dock whose dimensions belong to an earlier period of Scottish industrial ambition.

The next stage has now entered the procurement system. Kishorn Port Limited is preparing to seek contractors for a new 150-metre quay on the reclaimed land, with water 12 metres deep at chart datum. The estimated construction value is £30 million. The works are expected to include a piled quay wall, mooring dolphins, rock anchors, walkways, lighting, services, surfacing and heavy rock protection.

The procurement notice, published on 28 August, describes the project in conventional engineering terms. Its location gives those works a different historical scale. Kishorn is not a new port being constructed to capture the offshore wind market. It is the remains of one of the most remarkable industrial experiments of the North Sea oil era, now being physically enlarged for a second energy economy.

A dry dock cut out of the Highlands

The Kishorn yard was developed by Howard Doris in the 1970s after the discovery of large North Sea oilfields created demand for offshore structures of unprecedented size. Work began on the north side of Loch Kishorn in 1975. The principal commission was the Ninian Central Platform, ordered for Chevron's Ninian field east of Shetland.

The geography of Kishorn made possible something that would have been extremely difficult at an ordinary industrial site. The loch provided deep, relatively sheltered water. The surrounding rock supplied construction material. A vast dry dock could be excavated immediately beside the sea and used to form the base of an offshore platform before the structure was floated into deeper water for completion.

The original excavation removed around 1.8 million tonnes of Torridonian sandstone. The dry dock created within it had a working diameter of approximately 160 metres. At the height of the Ninian project, more than 3,000 people were employed at Kishorn. The workforce became known locally as the Kishorn

Commandos, and accommodation included two former passenger ships brought to the loch.

The concrete base constructed there was itself an extraordinary piece of engineering. Its base was around 140 metres in diameter and weighed approximately 157,000 tonnes when it was floated out of the dry dock in September 1976. Construction continued in the deeper waters of Loch Kishorn until the completed platform reached about 156 metres in height.

The finished Ninian Central structure weighed more than 600,000 tonnes. In 1978 it was towed from the west Highlands around the north of Scotland and into the North Sea by eight tugs, a journey that took eleven and a half days. The platform was installed in water around 136 metres deep.

Kishorn Port describes it as one of the largest man-made moveable objects ever constructed. The platform remains offshore today.

The boom did not last

Kishorn's first industrial life was comparatively short. Howard Doris operated the yard from 1975 until 1987. The North Sea construction market changed, oil-industry investment contracted and the enormous workforce assembled around individual platform projects could not be sustained indefinitely.

The yard diversified into other construction work before financial difficulties brought the original operation to an end. Much of the site was subsequently cleared. The infrastructure left behind included something that could not easily be reproduced elsewhere: an enormous dry dock opening directly into a deep Highland sea loch.

It returned to use in 1992 for construction of concrete caissons for the Skye Bridge. Later plans increasingly looked towards renewable energy. In 2013 the site obtained licensing as a renewable-energy construction facility.

Kishorn Port Limited had been established several years earlier as a joint venture between two Scottish businesses, Ferguson Transport and Leiths. The company remains owned equally by them. Ferguson brought port operations, shipping and heavy transport experience; Leiths brought quarrying, concrete and construction-material capability.

The combination has particular relevance to the next proposed use of the site. Kishorn has an operational quarry immediately beside one of Europe's largest dry docks. Concrete floating wind foundations require very large quantities of material and enormous areas in which structures can be manufactured, stored, assembled and moved into water.

The dry dock has already returned to heavy industry

Kishorn's revival did not begin with offshore wind. During the past decade the site has increasingly returned to work connected with oil, gas and marine engineering.

The dry dock has been used for vessel recycling and maintenance. The Voyageur Spirit floating production, storage and offloading vessel was brought to Kishorn for preservation work. The Northern Producer semi-submersible drilling rig has used the anchorage. In 2023 the Noble Intrepid, one of the world's largest jack-up drilling rigs, entered the dry dock for inspection, maintenance and repair.

The existing dock is now described by the port as 260 metres long and 160 metres wide, with a gate opening of 166 metres and water depth of 13.8 metres at mean high water springs. Its scale allows structures that cannot enter most conventional harbours to be brought inside.

The expansion now under way increases both the dimensions of the dock and the amount of usable industrial land surrounding it.

Phase 1a is a £42.2 million project involving dry-dock expansion and reclamation. Highlands and Islands Enterprise agreed £24.259 million of public investment in June 2025. The Scottish Government places the investment within its commitment of up to £500 million over five years for Scottish ports and the offshore-wind supply chain.

The public funding is substantial because the economic proposition is larger than the port itself. Once fully developed, Highlands and Islands Enterprise estimates that projects attracted to the expanded facility could support as many as 1,500 jobs.

The new quay changes what Kishorn can do

The £30 million East Quay now being prepared for tender belongs to the next stage of that development. The 150-metre structure will sit against the land created from the current reclamation works. A depth of 12 metres below chart datum will allow large vessels and floating structures to berth alongside the new industrial area.

The engineering specification indicates the loads for which the site is being prepared. Sheet and combined piles will form the quay structure. Mooring dolphins will be anchored into rock. Heavy rock armour will protect the works. The reclaimed area behind the quay will provide working and laydown space rather than conventional waterfront development.

For offshore wind, land immediately beside deep water is an industrial resource. Turbine components and floating foundations are too large to move easily by road. Some structures are assembled at the waterfront and transferred directly into the sea. Others arrive or depart on specialised vessels. Large areas are required simply to store components while projects wait for installation windows.

Kishorn's existing dry dock adds another capability. Concrete floating foundations can potentially be constructed inside the dock and floated when sufficiently complete, reproducing in a different form the method used to build the Ninian platform half a century earlier.

Floating wind requires ports of a different scale

Scotland's offshore wind plans are creating an industrial requirement that did not exist when most Scottish ports were designed. Fixed-bottom turbines can be installed in shallower water using foundations attached directly to the seabed. Much of Scotland's deeper offshore resource will require floating technology, in which the turbine stands on a buoyant structure moored to the seabed.

The resulting structures are enormous. Their dimensions and weight create requirements for deep water, heavy-load quays, extensive laydown areas, assembly facilities and sheltered locations where floating units can be completed before being towed offshore.

The Scottish Government reset its offshore-wind ambition in January 2026 to as much as 40 gigawatts of new capacity by 2040. The seabed options already awarded through ScotWind and other leasing rounds have produced a development pipeline far larger than the present Scottish port and manufacturing base was built to accommodate.

The economic value of that pipeline depends partly upon where its physical components are made.

The latest Supply Chain Development Statements from 16 ScotWind projects project £25.5 billion of expenditure in Scotland across development, manufacturing, installation and operation. The distribution of that spending is uneven. Scottish Government figures published in August show that Scotland currently accounts for 62 per cent of projected development commitments and 70 per cent of operations commitments, but only 20 per cent of manufacturing and fabrication.

Ports such as Kishorn are being expanded within that gap.

Scotland has offshore wind but does not automatically have an offshore wind industry

Generating electricity in Scottish waters and manufacturing the equipment used to generate it has shaped the economic debate around offshore wind from the beginning. A wind farm can be located off Scotland while its turbines, towers, foundations, cables and specialist vessels are produced elsewhere.

The oil industry followed a related pattern. Scotland captured substantial engineering, fabrication and service activity from the North Sea, but not every stage of the supply chain remained domestic. Kishorn itself demonstrates both the scale that Scottish fabrication once achieved and the vulnerability of industrial sites dependent upon cycles of major projects.

The current port strategy attempts to create facilities before the largest offshore-wind construction programmes begin. Public money is being used to reduce the initial infrastructure cost so Scottish sites are capable of competing when developers place manufacturing and assembly contracts.

Kishorn is one of several ports pursuing that work. Nigg, Ardersier, Cromarty Firth, Aberdeen, Dundee, Leith, Stornoway and other locations are developing different combinations of manufacturing, marshalling, assembly and maintenance capability.

They are not interchangeable. Water depth, quay strength, available land, road access, local industry, grid connections and distance from offshore projects determine what each site can realistically perform.

Kishorn's particular advantage is scale beside sheltered deep water. Its weakness is the same geography that made the original yard extraordinary: it is a remote west-coast industrial site connected to the rest of Scotland by infrastructure never designed around a large manufacturing centre.

The new industrial geography may not resemble the old one

During the Ninian project, Kishorn overcame remoteness by moving extraordinary quantities of people and material by sea. The construction camp functioned almost as a temporary industrial settlement. The modern development is unlikely to reproduce the 1970s workforce model.

Automation, modular manufacturing, modern employment patterns and improved transport have changed how large engineering projects are delivered. Offshore wind also requires continuity if permanent industrial employment is to replace temporary construction peaks.

The forecast of up to 1,500 jobs depends upon projects being attracted to the expanded facilities once they exist. Public investment creates capability; it does not create an order book.

The timing of the quay procurement therefore sits between two decisions. Scotland has decided to help build the infrastructure. Offshore-wind developers will later decide where to place the contracts that use it.

The latest ScotWind supply-chain figures show why those decisions will determine the economic outcome. Scotland's projected share of manufacturing and fabrication expenditure remains substantially below its projected share of development and operations expenditure.

The same rock is being moved for a second energy age

Kishorn's redevelopment has an unusual physical continuity with its past. The first energy boom required a mountainside to be excavated to create the dry dock. The current expansion is again removing rock, but this time the material has also been used to create new industrial land from the loch.

Approximately one million tonnes have been blasted and moved during the latest works. Eight and a half hectares have emerged beside the dock. The next £30 million phase will turn part of that new shoreline into a deep-water working quay.

The original yard was constructed to make a single extraordinary object for an oilfield east of Shetland. What remains of it is now being redesigned around an industry that may require repeated construction of very large floating structures for decades.

Few pieces of Scottish infrastructure have crossed the energy transition so literally. The dry dock that helped put a 600,000-tonne oil platform into the North Sea is being enlarged so that Scotland can compete to manufacture the structures of the industry intended to follow it.

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ENERGY | 9 September 2026

Scotland Is Becoming a Giant Battery

Read online: <https://modern.scot/scotland-is-becoming-a-giant-battery/>



At the end of March, Scotland had 22 operating battery-storage projects with a combined capacity of 843 megawatts. Behind them was something much larger: 426 electricity-storage projects somewhere in the planning pipeline, with an estimated combined capacity of 41.8 gigawatts. Battery storage alone accounted for 32.8 gigawatts, more proposed capacity than either onshore or offshore wind. A new class of electricity infrastructure is spreading across Scotland,

much of it beside substations, former power stations and the transmission network. Its owners include international infrastructure funds, investment companies and specialist energy developers, and the electricity stored inside it may have been generated hundreds of miles away.

On 12 August, a battery began commercial operation at Coalburn in South Lanarkshire. Its owner, Copenhagen Infrastructure Partners, describes it as the largest operating battery-energy-storage system in Europe. Coalburn 1 can import or export electricity at a rate of 500 megawatts and can sustain that output for two hours, giving it one gigawatt-hour of storage.

Two more projects belonging to the same investment group are following it. Coalburn 2 is being built beside the first development in South Lanarkshire, while Devilla is being developed near Kincardine in Fife. Each is planned at another 500 megawatts with two hours of storage. Together, the three sites will provide 1.5 gigawatts of power capacity and three gigawatt-hours of storage. The second and third projects represent part of an investment programme previously put at around £800 million.

The three batteries are ultimately investments of Copenhagen Infrastructure Partners, a Danish fund manager that invests institutional capital in energy infrastructure around the world. Their battery equipment is being supplied by Canadian Solar's energy-storage business. The engineering and construction supply chains extend further.

On the opposite side of the Forth, another large battery is under construction on land at Cockenzie, where one of Scotland's great coal-fired power stations once stood. The power station closed in 2013 and its twin chimneys were demolished two years later. The site remains closely connected to the transmission system that once carried electricity from coal generation into the Scottish grid.

The new Cockenzie battery is being developed as part of the portfolio of Gresham House Energy Storage Fund. Its latest financial update records Cockenzie among 397 megawatts of new battery projects that reached financial close in May. Construction is under way, with energisation of the Cockenzie project targeted for the first half of 2028. A joint venture involving Sumitomo Corporation and TPK Holdings has taken a 25 per cent interest in Cockenzie and two other projects in the portfolio.

At Coalburn, Cockenzie and dozens of less familiar locations, the physical geography of Scottish electricity is changing. The twentieth-century system was dominated by places that made power: hydro stations, coal stations, nuclear plants and later gas turbines and wind farms. The emerging system increasingly includes

places whose principal purpose is to move electricity through time.

Scotland now has more battery storage proposed than wind power

The scale of the change is visible in the Scottish Government's own energy statistics. At the end of March 2026, Scotland had 24 operational electricity-storage projects with an estimated capacity of 1,583 megawatts. Two were pumped-storage hydro stations accounting for 740 megawatts. The other 22 were batteries, with 843 megawatts between them.

The development pipeline was of an entirely different order. The government recorded 1,236 renewable-energy projects at various stages of planning, construction or development, representing 85.4 gigawatts of estimated capacity. Of those, 426 were electricity-storage projects representing 41.8 gigawatts.

Battery storage accounted for 32.8 gigawatts of the pipeline. The equivalent figures for onshore wind and offshore wind were 18.7 gigawatts and 17.3 gigawatts respectively.

Those numbers do not mean that Scotland is going to build 32.8 gigawatts of batteries. A development pipeline contains projects at very different stages, including proposals that may never obtain consent, financing, grid connections or construction contracts. Some projects can also remain in databases after commercial circumstances have changed.

They nevertheless show where developers are attempting to place capital. By estimated capacity, batteries have become the largest individual technology in Scotland's renewable-energy planning pipeline.

The Scottish Government's earlier snapshot at the end of September 2025 recorded approximately half a gigawatt of operating battery capacity and another 2.7 gigawatts that had already received permission and was awaiting construction. The operating total has since risen sharply, in large part because Coalburn 1 alone added 500 megawatts when it entered commercial operation.

The battery does not create the electricity

A grid-scale battery is both simpler and more complicated than a power station. It imports electricity, converts and stores the energy electrochemically, and later exports electricity back to the grid. Most large Scottish projects currently use lithium-ion technology, although other technologies are being developed for longer-duration storage.

Capacity is normally described using two measurements that can easily be confused. Megawatts describe how quickly the battery can import or export power. Megawatt-hours describe how much energy it can hold. A 500-megawatt battery capable of operating at maximum output for two hours therefore stores approximately 1,000 megawatt-hours, or one gigawatt-hour.

This becomes increasingly useful in an electricity system dominated by variable generation. Scotland can produce large quantities of wind electricity when demand is comparatively low or when the transmission network cannot move all available generation to where it is required. At other periods, wind output falls while demand rises.

Storage introduces time between production and consumption. Electricity can be imported when it is abundant and exported later. Batteries can also respond rapidly to instructions from the electricity-system operator, allowing them to participate in balancing and other grid services.

The commercial model is consequently more complicated than simply buying electricity cheaply and selling it at a higher price. Battery owners can earn revenues from wholesale-market trading, the Balancing Mechanism and services required to maintain the electricity system. The precise mixture changes as markets and grid requirements change.

National Energy System Operator has been changing its own systems to accommodate the physical limitations of batteries. In June, new Grid Code arrangements went live allowing limited-duration assets to tell the control room more clearly how much energy they can deliver over time. A conventional generator supplied with fuel and a battery containing a finite charge cannot be scheduled in exactly the same way.

Scotland has a particular reason to attract storage

Scotland's geography separates a large concentration of renewable generation from major centres of electricity demand farther south. Wind generation has expanded faster than some parts of the transmission system needed to carry its maximum output. Network reinforcements are being constructed, including major new substations, overhead lines, subsea cables and high-voltage direct-current links.

Until enough transmission capacity exists, periods occur when generators in constrained parts of the network are instructed to reduce output because the electricity cannot all be transported through the available system.

Batteries cannot eliminate that problem by themselves. Their usefulness depends upon their location, connection, duration and the conditions at the time. A two-hour battery also cannot absorb an indefinite period of excess wind generation. Once fully charged, it has no further storage capacity until electricity is discharged.

But a battery placed at an appropriate point on the network can absorb electricity during one period and return it during another. That makes substations and existing grid connections commercially valuable locations.

Cockenzie illustrates the pattern. The coal station disappeared, but the electricity infrastructure around the site did not. Similar relationships between former generating sites, substations and new storage projects are appearing elsewhere in Britain.

The next proposal is appearing between Perth and Dundee

This week, residents around Inchtute and Errol have been attending public exhibitions for another proposed development. Halfway Energy Park is being promoted by Aukera, a renewable-energy company operating in several European countries with offices in London and Edinburgh.

The developer says the proposed battery project could store an amount of electricity equivalent to as much as 5 per cent of Scotland's annual non-domestic electricity use, according to the methodology accompanying its project material. Public consultation events were held at Inchtute Village Hall on 7 September and Errol Village Hall on 8 September.

Aukera says 60 per cent of its current UK development pipeline is in Scotland. The Halfway project is at an earlier stage than Coalburn or Cockenzie and its eventual scale and configuration will be determined through development, consenting, connection and financing processes.

The location of proposals such as Halfway shows how battery infrastructure can arrive without the visual characteristics historically associated with electricity generation. There is no chimney and no turbine. A

large BESS development generally consists of rows of battery enclosures, power-conversion equipment, transformers, access infrastructure, fencing, drainage and a grid connection.

The land requirement can still be substantial, particularly as individual developments move into hundreds of megawatts.

Scotland only published dedicated planning guidance this year

The speed of development has required Scotland's planning system to establish a more consistent approach to the technology. In March 2026, the Scottish Government published dedicated planning guidance for battery-energy-storage systems for the first time.

The document acknowledges that BESS remains an evolving sector and that relatively few sites were operational when the guidance was prepared. It covers site selection, landscape and visual effects, noise, transport, biodiversity, drainage, decommissioning and fire safety.

Scottish planning law treats a battery installation as an electricity-generating station for consenting purposes. Projects of 50 megawatts or less are normally determined by local planning authorities. Developments above 50 megawatts require consent from Scottish ministers under section 36 of the Electricity Act 1989, with applications administered by the Energy Consents Unit.

The threshold means many of the largest batteries entering Scotland are decided nationally rather than through an ordinary local planning application.

The government commissioned Ironside Farrar to prepare the new guidance at a cost of £29,700 including VAT, with a further £1,071.41 in publishing costs. An environmental-information request subsequently established those figures.

The guidance arrived while the development pipeline was already measured in hundreds of projects.

Fire has created a separate regulatory problem

Most current grid-scale batteries use lithium-ion cells. Under abnormal conditions, damaged or defective cells can enter thermal runaway, in which heat generated inside the cell contributes to further heating and potentially propagates to neighbouring cells.

The Scottish Government's planning guidance therefore addresses separation between battery units, distances from boundaries and occupied buildings, emergency access, water supplies, containment and the treatment of potentially contaminated firewater. Applicants are encouraged to set out how monitoring, incident detection, drainage and emergency arrangements have been designed into a project.

The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service follows National Fire Chiefs Council guidance for grid-scale battery installations. Its role in the Scottish planning process has an unusual feature: SFRS is not a statutory consultee on BESS applications. Planning authorities and the Energy Consents Unit can seek its advice, and the service says it will identify proposals that appear inconsistent with relevant fire guidance when it is asked to participate.

Responsibility is also distributed across other regimes. Planning authorities determine land-use questions; health-and-safety law applies to construction and operation; environmental regulation can become relevant to pollution and contaminated firewater; and electricity legislation governs larger generating installations.

As the number and scale of sites increase, emergency services will encounter an infrastructure class that

scarcely existed in Scotland a decade ago.

The owners are not necessarily electricity companies

The ownership structure developing around batteries differs from the traditional image of a utility owning a power station.

Coalburn 1 belongs to a fund managed by Copenhagen Infrastructure Partners. Cockenzie sits within the portfolio of a London-listed investment fund managed by Gresham House, with a minority interest in the project held through a joint venture involving Japanese and Taiwanese capital. Other Scottish battery developments belong to renewable developers, specialist storage businesses and project companies financed by institutional investors.

This is possible because a battery can be treated simultaneously as electrical infrastructure and as a financial asset. Investors provide capital to build it. The asset earns revenues in electricity and grid-service markets. Those projected revenues can then be valued, financed and, in some cases, sold.

Gresham House Energy Storage Fund's latest half-year trading update demonstrates the relationship directly. The fund reported that its net asset value per share had risen by 15.8 per cent during the first half of 2026. The largest contributor was the revaluation of 397 megawatts of projects after they entered construction, including Cockenzie, Monets Garden and Elland 2. Moving those developments from an earlier stage into financed construction changed their value within the investment portfolio before they had begun operating.

The electricity system and the investment system are therefore developing together. A grid connection, planning consent, financing package and construction contract can turn a proposed battery into a more valuable financial asset long before it stores its first unit of electricity.

Ownership can change without anything changing on the ground

The company named on a planning application does not necessarily identify the ultimate source of capital behind a project. Large infrastructure developments are commonly held through special-purpose companies. Those companies can be sold, refinanced or brought into joint ventures while the battery remains in exactly the same field.

That makes a national ownership picture difficult to assemble from planning records alone.

A planning database can establish the developer or applicant at a particular date. Companies House can reveal directors, charges and corporate ownership within the UK. Investment-fund disclosures can identify portfolio interests. Overseas corporate records may be required to establish ultimate ownership farther up the chain.

The result can change between consent and operation.

Scotland consequently possesses good public information about how much storage capacity is proposed, but no single public register that presents every grid-scale battery alongside its ultimate beneficial owner, financing structure, grid connection, storage duration, technology, construction status and operational revenue model.

With 426 electricity-storage projects in the development pipeline by March, that missing picture is becoming increasingly substantial.

Thirty-two gigawatts does not mean thirty-two gigawatts will be built

There are powerful reasons for caution around the pipeline figures. Battery development has attracted large amounts of capital because the need for flexibility is increasing, but projects compete for many of the same things: suitable land, planning permission, equipment, financing and — most critically — connections to the electricity network.

A project can obtain planning consent and still wait years for a viable connection. Commercial assumptions can also change before construction. Battery revenues have already experienced periods of compression as more storage entered some markets. Technology costs, financing rates and electricity-market rules continue to change.

Some proposed Scottish projects will therefore disappear, shrink, change ownership or be superseded by other technologies.

The pipeline nevertheless contains another indication of the direction of travel. Scotland's electricity system is no longer being rebuilt only around generation and transmission. Storage is becoming a third major physical layer.

Two hours solves one problem, not every problem

Most of the largest batteries now being built in Scotland are designed around storage durations measured in hours rather than days. Coalburn 1, Coalburn 2 and Devilla are two-hour systems.

That makes them useful for balancing changes within a day, responding rapidly to the system operator and shifting electricity between periods of lower and higher value. It does not make them a complete answer to prolonged periods of low renewable generation.

Britain is therefore developing a separate long-duration electricity-storage regime. In June, Ofgem provisionally selected 16 projects for support through a cap-and-floor mechanism designed to encourage technologies capable of storing electricity for substantially longer periods. The proposed portfolio includes pumped-storage hydro, compressed-air storage, lithium-ion projects and vanadium-flow batteries.

Scotland already has a long history of storing electricity through pumped hydro. Cruachan began operating in the 1960s, using surplus electricity to pump water uphill before releasing it through turbines when power was required. Battery storage performs a related economic function without requiring two reservoirs and a mountain, but its physical and commercial characteristics are different.

The future Scottish storage system is likely to contain both.

The value of a battery depends partly on the system around it

A battery earns money because electricity has different values at different times and places, and because the system requires rapid services to keep supply and demand balanced. If every hour had the same electricity price, every part of the network had unlimited capacity and generation perfectly followed demand, many of those opportunities would disappear.

Scotland currently has the opposite conditions. Renewable generation varies. Transmission constraints remain significant. Electricity demand changes throughout the day. New loads, including electrified heating, transport, industry and data centres, are expected to alter demand further.

Storage can make that system more flexible. It can also derive commercial value from the volatility and constraints within it.

Those two facts coexist.

The public interest in battery infrastructure therefore extends beyond whether individual planning applications are approved. It includes the design of electricity markets, the cost of balancing the system, transmission investment and the distribution of financial returns from infrastructure being built partly because Scotland has become a major renewable-electricity producer.

The battery map is being drawn now

Coalburn 1 has already moved from proposal to operation. Coalburn 2 and Devilla are following it. Construction is under way at Cockenzie. Halfway Energy Park has entered public consultation. Other projects are moving through the Energy Consents Unit and council planning systems across the country.

At the end of March, the Scottish Government counted 32.8 gigawatts of battery projects in the development pipeline against 843 megawatts operating at that point. Even allowing for projects that will never be built, the difference between those two figures describes the scale of the investment contest now under way.

The twentieth-century map of Scottish electricity could be understood through a relatively small number of enormous generating sites: Longannet, Cockenzie, Hunterston, Torness, Peterhead, Cruachan and the hydro stations of the Highlands. Ownership and function were comparatively visible because electricity was

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One of Scotland's New Grid-Stability Machines Has Changed Hands

Read online: <https://modern.scot/one-of-scotlands-new-grid-stability-machines-has-changed-hands-between-global-infrastructure-funds/>



Blackhillock substation near Keith, Moray, which houses the HVDC converter station and synchronous condenser.

Credit: SEN Transmission

A little-known piece of electrical infrastructure in Moray changed hands this week. Foresight Group says it has acquired the Blackhillock Synchronous Condenser, a machine whose purpose is not principally to generate electricity but to provide some of the physical properties that coal, gas and nuclear generators once supplied automatically. Scotland's transition to renewable electricity is creating a second infrastructure programme behind the wind farms and

transmission lines: replacing the invisible services lost as large conventional generators leave the system.

On 7 September, Foresight Group announced that one of its funds had completed the acquisition of what it describes as the Blackhillock Synchronous Condenser from funds managed by Global Infrastructure Partners, the infrastructure investment business now owned by BlackRock. No purchase price was disclosed.

The asset is located near the Blackhillock transmission substation in Moray and, according to Foresight, has been operating since July 2025. It provides approximately 2 GVA of short-circuit level to the electricity network, supporting voltage recovery when disturbances occur. Foresight describes Blackhillock as one of only two synchronous-condenser facilities in north-east Scotland and says the substation beside it is one of the most constrained and strategically significant transmission nodes in Britain.

It is an unusual kind of energy asset. A synchronous condenser consumes a relatively small amount of electricity to keep a large electrical machine rotating in synchronism with the grid. It does not exist primarily to sell megawatt-hours to homes and businesses. Its value lies in what happens to the electricity system around it.

For most of the history of the national grid, many of those services arrived as a consequence of the way electricity was generated. Coal, gas and nuclear power stations contained enormous turbines connected to synchronous generators. Their rotating mass stored kinetic energy. When a large generator or transmission circuit suddenly failed, that stored energy resisted the immediate change in frequency while other parts of the system responded. The generators also contributed fault current and supported voltage across the network.

Scotland is replacing much of the generation fleet that supplied those properties. Wind turbines and solar installations generally connect through power electronics rather than behaving like the large synchronous machines around which the electricity system developed. High-voltage direct-current links also use converters to connect different parts of the network. Electricity can still be generated in enormous quantities, but the physical characteristics of the system change as the machines producing it change.

The old power stations did several jobs at once

Electricity generation is usually measured in megawatts and megawatt-hours, but operating a national power system requires more than producing enough energy to equal demand. Frequency must remain close to 50 hertz. Voltage must be controlled. Faults must be detected and cleared. The system must remain sufficiently strong for protective equipment and other electrical plant to behave as expected when something goes wrong.

Traditional synchronous generators contributed to several of those requirements simply by being connected. The inertia contained in their rotating machinery slowed the rate at which frequency changed after a sudden imbalance between generation and demand. Their electrical characteristics also supplied short-circuit current when faults occurred.

As coal stations closed and nuclear generation declined, the National Energy System Operator began procuring those characteristics separately rather than relying upon them as by-products of electricity generation.

Scotland became an early test of that new system because its generation mix changed quickly. Large quantities of onshore and offshore wind were connecting to a network from which conventional synchronous generation was disappearing. In 2022, the system operator awarded ten long-term contracts under the second phase of its Stability Pathfinder programme specifically to increase inertia and short-circuit level in Scotland.

The procurement sought 6 GVA seconds of inertia and 8.4 GVA of short-circuit level. The ten successful projects were contracted to provide approximately 6.75 GVA seconds of inertia and 11.55 GVA of short-circuit level. The forecast cost of those contracts was £323 million.

Five successful projects used synchronous condensers. Five used grid-forming battery technology.

The result was an electricity system beginning to purchase explicitly what conventional power stations had once supplied as part of their ordinary operation.

A synchronous condenser resembles a generator with the generation removed

The technology itself is old. Synchronous condensers have existed for more than a century. In mechanical terms they resemble synchronous motors or generators. A large rotor spins at a speed tied directly to the electrical frequency of the grid, but there is no steam turbine, gas turbine or other prime mover continually driving it to produce electricity for sale.

The machine can instead provide reactive power and voltage support. When fitted with sufficient rotating mass, it can contribute inertia. It can also increase the short-circuit strength of the network around it.

The absence of conventional generation is precisely the point. A grid can retain some of the electrical behaviour of large rotating power stations without burning fuel simply to keep those stations online for stability purposes.

This changes the economics of the electricity system. Services that were once bundled together inside a generating station can increasingly be separated. One company can own wind generation. Another can own a battery. A transmission company owns the wires. A separate infrastructure investor can own a machine whose commercial purpose is grid stability.

The Foresight acquisition places that final category into particularly clear view.

Blackhillock is becoming an electrical crossroads

The Blackhillock area near Keith already occupies an important position in Scotland's transmission system. The substation has been extensively developed as renewable generation in northern Scotland and offshore projects have connected into the network.

It is also becoming a concentration of new stability technologies. Zenobe operates a separate 200 MW battery at Blackhillock using grid-forming inverters. That project began commercial operation in March 2025 and was developed specifically to provide stability services as well as conventional battery functions.

The existence of several technologies at the same transmission node also creates a point of potential confusion in the public record.

Foresight's September 2026 announcement identifies its newly acquired asset as the Blackhillock Synchronous Condenser and states that it has operated since July 2025. NESO's published results for Stability Pathfinder Phase 2, however, identify the project named Blackhillock in that procurement as Zenobe Energy's grid-forming battery. The synchronous-condenser project listed separately in the same north-east Scottish area is identified as Beatrice.

Foresight says the asset it has acquired receives long-term grid-stability revenues, while specialist infrastructure reporting describes those revenues as availability-based and contracted through to 2034. The transaction price and detailed financial terms have not been published.

The naming does not alter the wider engineering development taking place at Blackhillock, but it demonstrates how difficult the emerging stability market can be to reconstruct from public information. A single transmission location can contain a substation, HVDC infrastructure, batteries, synchronous equipment and projects owned by different companies under different contracts.

Scotland became the laboratory because its electricity changed first

The Stability Pathfinder programme was created in response to declining levels of transmission-connected synchronous generation. Scotland presented the problem earlier and more intensely than many other parts of Britain because wind generation was expanding rapidly while large conventional generating units were retiring.

Hunterston B nuclear station stopped generating in 2022. Longannet, once Scotland's largest coal-fired power station, had closed in 2016. Torness remains operational but is approaching the end of its generating life. At the same time, Scotland has continued adding renewable capacity and has an exceptionally large pipeline of further wind development.

The electricity produced by a wind farm is no less real than electricity produced by a thermal station. The engineering difference lies in the way much modern renewable generation interfaces with the alternating-current network.

Power electronics can now reproduce some characteristics previously associated with rotating machines. Grid-forming batteries are one example. They can respond extremely rapidly and can help establish or support electrical frequency rather than simply following a signal already present on the network.

Synchronous condensers solve part of the same problem mechanically. The Scottish Pathfinder procurement deliberately contracted both approaches.

That means Scotland is not simply replacing fossil electricity with renewable electricity. It is redesigning the machinery required to make a power system dominated by renewable generation behave reliably.

Stability has become a market

The institutional change is as significant as the engineering one. NESO can identify a requirement for inertia, short-circuit level or other stability characteristics in a particular part of the network and procure those services under contract. Investors can then finance infrastructure whose revenues depend upon supplying them.

Foresight's acquisition shows the next stage of that process. Once built and contracted, a stability asset can become an investable piece of infrastructure capable of being bought and sold.

Foresight is a FTSE 250 investment manager operating across infrastructure and private capital. The seller, Global Infrastructure Partners, became part of BlackRock following BlackRock's acquisition of GIP in 2024. The Blackhillock transaction therefore moves an operational component of Scotland's electricity-stability infrastructure between funds managed by two large investment groups.

The underlying service remains contracted to the electricity system. Ownership of the asset and responsibility for operating it can change while the machine continues performing the same physical function.

That model is already familiar elsewhere in infrastructure. Wind farms, transmission interests, renewable portfolios and battery projects regularly change hands after development or construction. Stability equipment is now entering the same investment market.

The cost of renewable electricity extends beyond the generator

The transformation also changes how the cost of the electricity system should be understood. The price of generating a megawatt-hour from wind does not encompass every investment required to operate a grid containing large quantities of wind.

Transmission has to be expanded to move electricity from where it is generated to where it is consumed. Storage and flexible demand can move consumption across time. Interconnectors move power between regions and countries. Constraint payments arise when the network cannot accommodate all available generation. Stability services maintain the electrical conditions in which the system can operate.

None of those costs establishes that renewable generation is uneconomic. They describe the infrastructure of the system into which it is being integrated.

The older electricity system also contained extensive supporting infrastructure, from coal transport and fuel storage to reserve generation and transmission reinforcement. Much of the difference is that services once embedded inside large power stations are becoming visible as separate contracts and separate assets.

Scotland's energy transition can therefore be seen increasingly in places where no additional electricity is being produced. It is visible in substations, converter stations, grid-forming batteries, synchronous condensers and new transmission lines whose function is to make the generation already being built usable and secure.

The machine Foresight says it has acquired at Blackhillock belongs to that less visible system. It can be valuable while producing almost none of the commodity around which the electricity industry appears to revolve.

For more than a century, large rotating generators stabilised Britain's electricity network while producing its power. Scotland is now separating those two functions. Wind farms can produce the electricity. Other machines are being paid to provide some of the physics that disappeared with the power stations they replaced.

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ECONOMY | 9 September 2026

When a Publicly Backed Scottish Technology Company Fails, Who Keeps the Invention?

Read online: <https://modern.scot/when-a-publicly-backed-scottish-technology-company-fails-who-keeps-the-invention/>



PureLiFi was created from research at the University of Edinburgh, received Scottish public support over more than a decade and built an international portfolio of patents around transmitting data through light. On 2 September, the appointment of administrators was filed at Companies House. The company may have failed, but its intellectual property has not disappeared. Patents can be bought and sold like other assets, and PureLiFi's portfolio now exposes a larger question in Scotland's economic strategy: when public money helps create and scale valuable technology, what does

Scotland retain if the company owning it becomes insolvent?

On 2 September 2026, a five-page notice appeared in the Companies House record of an Edinburgh technology company. It recorded the appointment of an administrator to PureLiFi Limited. The registered office was changed on the same day from Timber Bush in Leith to the Glasgow office of Begbies Traynor.

Forty-two jobs were lost.

The physical company had run out of money. Its technology had not.

PureLiFi spent more than a decade developing optical wireless communications: systems that transmit digital information through light rather than relying exclusively upon radio frequencies. The company grew from research associated with Professor Harald Haas at the University of Edinburgh, where work on visible-light communications established the foundations of what became known internationally as LiFi.

Over the following years, PureLiFi accumulated intellectual property covering receivers, transmitters, optical systems, displays and methods for moving data through light. Public patent databases identify numerous granted patents and pending applications assigned directly to PureLiFi Limited, including inventions granted as recently as 2026.

An insolvent technology company can therefore contain something very different from an insolvent restaurant, retailer or construction contractor. Much of its value may have no physical form.

The desks, computers and laboratory equipment can be sold. So can the inventions.

Scotland helped build PureLiFi

PureLiFi emerged from the University of Edinburgh research environment during the early development of LiFi. The company began life under earlier names before becoming PureLiFi and was established to commercialise technology developed around optical wireless communications.

Its growth was supported by several forms of capital. Private investors supplied substantial funding. University-connected investment also participated. Scottish Enterprise supported the company early in its development; its 2013-14 public disclosure recorded a repayable grant contribution to PureLiFi, while its annual accounts subsequently recorded further grant support.

The Scottish National Investment Bank later became one of the company's largest public backers. Its published portfolio records a £12.5 million investment in PureLiFi under the bank's mission to harness innovation. The investment was intended to support development of an application-specific integrated circuit, or ASIC, capable of helping LiFi technology move into consumer devices.

At the time, the company said it wanted to create a centre of LiFi excellence in Edinburgh and contribute to Scotland's wider photonics industry. The Bank described the investment as patient growth capital supporting highly skilled research and development jobs in Scotland.

Reporting following the administration puts the Bank's eventual commitment at £15 million, with £14.7 million drawn.

The failure occurred only weeks after PureLiFi registered changes to several floating charges and created a new charge in favour of the Scottish National Investment Bank. Companies House records show that charge was created on 21 July 2026. Other outstanding security interests include a floating charge in favour of Scottish Investments Limited and security held by Innovate UK Loans Limited.

The existence and ranking of security can affect what happens to the proceeds when assets are sold. The complete outcome will depend upon the legal rights contained in the relevant financing documents and the administrators' proposals.

A patent does not become worthless because its company fails

UK insolvency guidance treats patents as property. They may be licensed, mortgaged, assigned and sold. Where an insolvent business owns a patent, the intellectual-property right can be realised as an asset for the benefit of creditors.

The same applies to other forms of technology-company property. An administrator may sell trademarks, software, databases, websites, equipment, customer relationships and patent rights while attempting either to preserve the business or obtain a better result for creditors than immediate liquidation would produce.

PureLiFi's public patent record shows why this becomes economically significant. Patent databases list inventions assigned to the company across multiple generations of optical wireless technology. Recent records include a display apparatus allowing optical wireless communication through a display; freeform optical components for receivers; optical wireless interfaces; retransmission systems and network architectures.

Some applications were still being published in 2026. A company can therefore fail financially while owning intellectual property whose legal life continues for years.

The purchaser of that portfolio does not necessarily have to be Scottish. Intellectual property can cross a border without a factory moving, an employee relocating or a lorry leaving a warehouse.

A university spinout can contain more than one kind of intellectual property

There is another complication in university companies. The intellectual property used by a spinout can include

rights created at different stages and owned under different arrangements.

The University of Edinburgh's current guidance explains that intellectual property created by staff in the course of their university employment is normally owned by the university. A spinout may therefore commercialise university technology under a licence rather than owning every underlying right outright. Later inventions created inside the company may belong directly to the company.

The public record confirms that numerous PureLiFi patents are assigned to PureLiFi Limited. It does not, by itself, disclose the complete contractual relationship governing every piece of foundational technology originating at the University of Edinburgh. Those licence agreements are not set out in the ordinary Companies House record.

That creates several possible layers of value: university-owned intellectual property licensed to a company; patents subsequently created and owned by the company; technical knowledge held by employees; software and designs; and commercial agreements with customers or manufacturers.

An administrator has to establish what the company actually owns before it can sell it.

Public investment does not automatically mean public ownership of the technology

Scotland increasingly uses public money to help private technology companies cross the gap between research and commercial scale. That is deliberate economic policy.

The Scottish National Investment Bank was established to make long-term commercial investments aligned with national missions. Scottish Enterprise has invested alongside private investors for more than two decades. Universities create and license intellectual property into spinouts. Government-funded proof-of-concept programmes help researchers develop inventions far enough to attract commercial capital.

Those interventions do not normally convert every resulting patent into public property.

An equity investment gives the investor shares. A loan creates a creditor relationship. A secured loan may give the lender security over specified assets. A grant may contain conditions governing the project but does not necessarily give government ownership of the invention. A university licence establishes whatever rights the licence agreement contains.

The result is that the phrase "publicly funded technology" can describe several legally different things.

Public money may have paid for early research while the university owns the patent. An enterprise agency may then provide grant support. A public investment institution may later acquire shares or provide growth capital. Private investors may contribute several times as much. Employees inside the company may create additional patentable inventions. By the time the business fails, the economic interest of the Scottish public sector can be distributed across grants, shares, loans, security and indirect benefits rather than represented by ownership of one identifiable asset.

Scotland is preparing to put more public money into spinouts

The timing of PureLiFi's administration gives the issue a wider economic context.

Scotland's current innovation strategy places university commercialisation near the centre of its plans for economic growth. In February, the government published a report on turning research into companies,

describing new public programmes intended to bridge the gap between discovery and commercial scale. These include a £2.9 million Proof of Concept Fund and up to £7 million for a dedicated impact-venture spinout pipeline. Scottish Funding Council research and innovation support amounted to £328.5 million in 2025-26, including £25 million for knowledge exchange and innovation.

The new Programme for Government goes further. Ministers intend to work with the Scottish National Investment Bank to establish a Scottish Innovation Fund focused on university spinouts and to use public support to help high-potential companies scale and remain in Scotland.

The government's stated objective is not merely to create more companies. It wants successful spinouts to grow in Scotland rather than develop here and move elsewhere as capital requirements increase.

Its National Innovation Strategy explicitly treats retaining successful spinouts in Scotland as an economic objective.

PureLiFi presents the same issue from the other end of the company life cycle.

Failure is part of venture investment

Public investment in early and growth-stage technology cannot operate on the assumption that every company will succeed. Venture capital works because a portfolio can contain failures alongside companies whose increase in value compensates for losses elsewhere.

Scottish Enterprise describes its own role as investing alongside private capital where a financing gap exists. Its current strategy places greater emphasis on financial returns as well as economic impact so proceeds from successful investments can be recycled.

The Scottish National Investment Bank similarly invests commercially rather than operating as a conventional grant programme. Losses are therefore an expected possibility, not by themselves evidence that an investment should never have been made.

The economic calculation nevertheless extends beyond whether a public investor eventually recovers its cash.

A technology company can create high-skilled employment, expertise, supplier relationships, patents and an industrial cluster during the period in which public money supports it. Some of those assets remain geographically rooted after a company closes. Others are transferable.

Intellectual property belongs to the second category.

PureLiFi had already moved from licensing towards manufacturing

The administrators have attributed the immediate failure partly to a strategic shift. PureLiFi had historically sought to commercialise patented technology through licensing and components. In recent years it moved further into manufacturing its own hardware. That increased the amount of working capital required before corresponding revenue arrived.

The company raised more than £35 million across its life but did not reach profitability before further finance became unavailable.

The collapse therefore contains two separate stories. One is the commercial failure of a Scottish technology company. The other concerns the assets produced during 14 years of research, engineering and investment.

The second story has not finished.

The July security documents may determine part of what happens next

Companies House shows three charges outstanding against PureLiFi. One is held by Innovate UK Loans Limited. Another floating charge is held by Scottish Investments Limited. The most recent, created on 21 July 2026, names the Scottish National Investment Bank as the person entitled to the security.

A floating charge can extend across a company's undertaking and property and can give a secured creditor rights that an ordinary unsecured investor does not possess. The precise priority between creditors and the assets covered by each charge requires the underlying security documents and insolvency process to be examined rather than inferred from the headline amount invested.

That will affect the public-money account of the collapse. A £14.7 million drawdown and a £14.7 million final loss are not necessarily the same thing. Recoveries can occur through secured assets or a sale of the business and intellectual property, although there is presently no public basis for assuming what those recoveries will be.

The administrator must now establish what can be sold and at what price.

A patent portfolio can leave Scotland while the research that created it remains

The University of Edinburgh will continue to conduct research into optical wireless communications. Professor Haas's academic work and the research environment from which LiFi emerged are not assets of PureLiFi's insolvency estate simply because the company entered administration.

The company-owned patent portfolio is different.

If those rights are sold, their next owner could continue development in Scotland. They could be acquired by another British company. They could become part of the intellectual-property portfolio of an international semiconductor, communications, defence or electronics group. Individual patents could also be licensed or transferred under whatever arrangement produces the best outcome available to the administrators.

The legal process is designed primarily around the insolvent company and its creditors. It is not designed principally to preserve a national technology strategy.

That creates a point of contact between insolvency law and Scottish industrial policy. Government may spend years helping research move from a university laboratory into a company because it wants high-value technology anchored in Scotland. Insolvency can subsequently place the resulting commercial rights into a process whose purpose is creditor recovery.

The Scottish Government is now preparing new investment vehicles specifically to create more university spinouts and help them become larger companies. PureLiFi provides an early test of another part of that model: what Scotland's public institutions retain when a company does not reach the scale for which it was funded.

The answer will not be found in the original investment announcement. It will appear in the administrator's proposals, the security rights registered against the company, the ownership and licensing terms attached to its intellectual property, the eventual purchaser of the patents, and whatever proceeds return to secured and unsecured creditors.

The company that carried the name PureLiFi may now be in administration. The technology developed inside it remains property. Who owns that property next will determine where part of the value created in Edinburgh over the past 14 years goes.

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POLICY AND GOVERNMENT | 9 September 2026

Scotland Is About to Rewrite the Map of Its Public Bodies

Read online: <https://modern.scot/scotland-is-about-to-rewrite-the-map-of-its-public-bodies/>



The Scottish Government has begun a five-year programme to reduce a public sector landscape containing more than 130 national bodies. Transport Scotland is to return to government, four environmental organisations may be brought under one body, food regulators are to be combined, transport organisations reviewed for merger and Scotland's health-board structure radically reduced. The last comparable programme of public-body mergers exceeded some of its original cost estimates. This time the restructuring sits inside a wider plan to remove £1 billion a year from government and public-body

corporate costs.

Scotland's public sector contains organisations for regulating food, registering land, protecting nature, operating transport policy, scrutinising care, financing businesses, administering taxes, supporting the arts, managing qualifications, protecting the environment and performing dozens of other functions that government has decided should not be carried out directly by a ministerial department.

There are more than 130 national public bodies in the current system. The Scottish Government's own reform strategy used a figure of 131 public bodies alongside 50 government directorates when it began examining the structure in detail last year.

On 1 September, ministers moved from a general commitment to simplify that landscape to naming organisations that may disappear in their present form.

Transport Scotland is to be brought back inside the Scottish Government. The Scottish Environment Protection Agency, NatureScot and Zero Waste Scotland are to be brought within a single overarching environmental organisation, with Scottish Forestry potentially joining them. The Scottish Food Commission and Scottish Pubs Code Adjudicator are to be integrated into Food Standards Scotland while retaining independent scrutiny functions. Architecture & Design Scotland is to be embedded within More Homes Scotland.

National Records of Scotland and Registers of Scotland are to undergo reform activity. The remaining transport bodies will be reviewed for merger opportunities. Ministers will explore a single ferries body for Clyde and Western Isles routes. Revenue Scotland may acquire additional revenue functions. The health and care assurance landscape is to be simplified. Separate proposals would replace Scotland's 14 territorial NHS boards with two strategic health boards and reduce the number of special health boards.

The First-tier and Upper Tribunals are being removed from the public-bodies directory because ministers regard them as judicial bodies supported by the Scottish Courts and Tribunals Service rather than public bodies of the kind the directory is intended to catalogue.

Some of these changes are decisions. Others are reviews, proposals or explorations whose final form has not been settled. Taken together, they amount to a reconstruction of the machinery through which a substantial part of devolved Scotland is administered.

Scotland has done this before

The number and shape of Scottish public bodies have never been fixed. Governments create specialised organisations when functions require expertise, operational independence, regulation or a degree of separation from ministers. Later governments inherit those organisations alongside new responsibilities and new institutions of their own.

At the beginning of devolution, Scotland already possessed a large public-body landscape. Parliamentary records show 186 bodies in 1999 under the classifications then in use. The total fell substantially during the following years, partly because health-service structures were reorganised.

In 2007, another Scottish Government began an explicit simplification programme. Its target was to reduce the number of national public-sector organisations by 25 per cent. The baseline used for that programme was 199 bodies.

The programme produced 18 mergers and transfers between 2008 and 2011. Skills Development Scotland was assembled from Careers Scotland, the Scottish University for Industry and skills functions previously housed within the enterprise agencies. Marine Scotland brought together the Fisheries Research Services, the Scottish Fisheries Protection Agency and a government marine directorate. Creative Scotland replaced the Scottish Arts Council and Scottish Screen. The Care Inspectorate combined functions previously distributed among several organisations.

By December 2011, 28 bodies had been removed directly through the simplification programme. Further structural changes took the overall reduction beyond that figure.

The administrative logic was similar to that being used in 2026: fewer boundaries, reduced duplication, clearer accountability and lower overhead costs.

The previous mergers did not come free

Audit Scotland examined the earlier programme in 2012. Most of the mergers it studied had been completed on schedule, but the audit identified weaknesses in leadership, planning and the speed at which the new organisations established stable structures.

It also found that the costs of four major mergers had already reached £42 million, compared with an original estimate of approximately £30 million. At that point the auditor could not confirm total savings across the merger programme.

The individual cases varied markedly. Skills Development Scotland was the largest of the four examined in detail. Its merger had initially been expected to cost £20 million and generate £77 million in savings over five years. Creative Scotland had projected merger costs of £3.3 million and savings of £4.9 million over three years. The Care Inspectorate had forecast £5.6 million of costs and £6.2 million of savings.

Those figures demonstrate the financial character of structural reform. A merger can eventually reduce duplicated corporate functions while initially requiring expenditure on staff changes, information systems, premises, branding, legal arrangements and organisational redesign. Two bodies becoming one does not mean that the statutory work previously undertaken by two bodies disappears.

The current programme is larger than a merger plan

The government published its Public Service Reform Strategy in June 2025. It committed to reducing annualised corporate costs across the Scottish Government and public bodies by £1 billion over five years, equivalent to around 20 per cent of the corporate and core operating costs identified for the exercise.

That £1 billion is not presented as a saving that will come solely from abolishing public bodies. The strategy includes shared services, property rationalisation, digital systems, automation, joint procurement and reductions in corporate functions alongside organisational consolidation.

The Scottish public sector spends more than £16 billion each year procuring goods, works and services. Government wants more of that expenditure placed through common national arrangements. It is also examining shared payment systems, call handling, data services and other functions currently duplicated across organisations.

Public-body mergers therefore form one part of a larger attempt to make government operate more like a single system.

The environmental merger will combine organisations with different legal roles

The proposed environmental body illustrates the complexity.

SEPA is an environmental regulator. It regulates activities including waste, pollution and water use and exercises enforcement powers established in law. NatureScot is the national nature agency, advising government and managing functions connected with habitats, species and protected areas. Zero Waste Scotland works on waste reduction, circular-economy policy and behaviour change. Scottish Forestry performs regulatory and policy functions for forests and woodland.

Combining organisations can reduce separate boards, executive structures, finance departments, property requirements and administrative systems. It can also put regulatory, advisory, promotional and delivery functions within a single institutional structure.

The final design will therefore determine more than the number of logos on government websites. It will determine where statutory powers sit, how independent regulatory decisions are protected, how ministers issue directions and how the new organisation is scrutinised.

The Programme for Government says Scottish Forestry is a potential participant rather than a confirmed one. That detail indicates how much of the architecture remains under design.

Transport is moving in the opposite institutional direction from 2002

Transport Scotland was established as an executive agency in 2006, creating a specialised national transport organisation at arm's length within government. Twenty years later, ministers intend to bring it back into the core Scottish Government.

The wider transport landscape will also be reviewed for mergers, while government explores a single ferries organisation for the Clyde and Western Isles.

Those reforms intersect with another history of Scottish administrative restructuring. Ferry ownership, procurement, operations, infrastructure and policy have for years been divided among government, Caledonian

Maritime Assets Ltd, CalMac Ferries and other bodies. Transport infrastructure similarly involves national government, councils, Network Rail, ScotRail and multiple statutory and commercial organisations.

A reduction in organisational boundaries can make a chain of responsibility shorter. It can also concentrate more decisions inside ministers' departments. The constitutional character of a public body therefore forms part of the reform, not merely its administrative cost.

Public bodies exist partly because governments once wanted separation

Scotland's present landscape was not created accidentally. Public bodies are frequently established because a function was considered better performed by specialists outside a conventional government directorate. Regulators may require operational independence. Funding bodies make decisions that governments do not wish ministers to make individually. Cultural organisations can be insulated from direct political control. Tribunals and scrutiny organisations require varying degrees of institutional separation.

The government's own public-bodies directory describes those organisations as providing specialist knowledge, delivering services, funding activities, regulating systems, scrutinising performance and offering impartial advice to ministers and Parliament.

Any programme designed to reduce their number therefore has two separate accounts. One records cost, staff, property and duplication. The other records powers and independence.

A body can disappear administratively while every one of its statutory duties survives somewhere else.

The number itself can mislead

Scotland had 249 bodies under the classifications used in 1995, 186 in 1999 and 140 in 2004. The government's present count is above 130. Those numbers cannot simply be placed on a line and interpreted as evidence that government expanded and contracted by the same amount. Definitions changed, functions moved, health-service structures were reorganised and new categories of institution emerged.

One of the first changes announced in September illustrates the problem: two tribunals have been removed from the directory not because their functions ceased but because government concluded that judicial bodies should not be counted there.

A successful reform therefore cannot be measured solely by reaching a smaller number.

Audit Scotland reached a similar conclusion after the previous merger programme. Structural changes needed clear objectives, stable leadership and measures capable of demonstrating whether the resulting organisation performed better. Savings had to be established rather than assumed from the existence of a merger.

A new law is coming

The Scottish Government intends to introduce a Public Service Renewal (Scotland) Bill during the first year of the new parliamentary term. It will provide at least part of the legislative machinery required for the restructuring programme.

Some changes can be achieved administratively. Others involve bodies and statutory functions created by Acts of Parliament and will require legislation before ministers can abolish, transfer or combine them.

The process will run alongside a proposed reorganisation of local government and social care, the reduction of NHS boards and changes within the Scottish civil service itself. The government has described its intention as

a rewiring of the Scottish state.

There is now enough information to identify the first components of that rewiring, but not yet enough to calculate its final cost, workforce consequences or institutional shape.

The previous Scottish simplification programme provides a useful ledger for the one now beginning. Bodies were successfully merged and the national count fell. Some changes produced identifiable savings. Implementation also cost more than expected in several of the major cases examined by Audit Scotland, while the total financial effect was difficult to establish.

Five years from now, Scotland may have substantially fewer public bodies. The more complete measure will be whether the functions they currently perform cost less, work better and remain accountable after the organisations carrying their names have gone.

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COMMUNITY | 10 September 2026

Rainbow City Taxis Pledges £30,000 as Aberdeen Arts Centre Fundraising Passes £279,000

Read online: <https://modern.scot/rainbow-city-taxis-pledges-30000-as-aberdeen-arts-centre-fundraising-passes-279000/>



Rainbow City Taxis has committed £30,000 over three years to the campaign to secure the future of Aberdeen Arts Centre, taking the amount raised by the £660,000 appeal beyond £279,000. The Aberdeen taxi company will contribute £10,000 a year through the partnership. The campaign has now secured about 42 per cent of its target, leaving approximately £381,000 still to raise.

One of Aberdeen's best-known taxi businesses has become the latest local company to commit long-term

financial support to Aberdeen Arts Centre.

Rainbow City Taxis will provide £30,000 over three years to the Save Aberdeen Arts Centre campaign. Rather than making a single contribution, the family-run company has entered a three-year partnership with the independent venue, providing £10,000 in each year.

The commitment moves the campaign beyond £279,000 raised from individuals, businesses, grants and foundations since it began in May 2025.

Against the campaign's £660,000 target, approximately £381,000 remains to be secured.

The latest figures provide a measure of the progress made since the fundraising drive began. More than two-fifths of the target has now been raised, while the campaign continues to seek support over the remainder of its three-year period.

A local company makes a three-year commitment

Rainbow City Taxis has operated in Aberdeen for more than three decades and describes itself as a family-run business. Its decision to support the Arts Centre also has a personal connection: members of the family behind the company have performed at the venue.

Lauren Bisset, operations director at Rainbow City Taxis, said the company wanted its contribution to help preserve opportunities for future performers.

"Performing at the Arts Centre is a rite of passage for so many local performers, and many of our family members have trodden the boards there," she said.

The partnership extends beyond the financial contribution. The two organisations intend to work together during the three-year period, including around transport for audiences attending the venue.

For the Arts Centre, the value of the agreement lies partly in its duration. A three-year commitment

provides income that can be anticipated across more than one financial period rather than relying upon a single fundraising event or donation.

£279,000 has now been raised

The Save Aberdeen Arts Centre campaign began with a target of £660,000 over three years. According to the latest figures supplied by the venue, more than £279,000 has now been secured.

That represents approximately 42.3 per cent of the total target.

Rainbow City Taxis' £30,000 commitment is equivalent to approximately 4.5 per cent of the full £660,000 appeal. It represents nearly 8 per cent of the approximately £381,000 that remains to be found.

The figures also demonstrate the cumulative nature of the campaign. No single £10,000 annual contribution can resolve a £660,000 funding requirement. A succession of individual donations, business partnerships and institutional grants can progressively reduce it.

The Arts Centre says the money is intended to support continued performances, creative learning and professional artist development while the organisation works towards a sustainable longer-term financial position.

Business support is becoming part of the funding structure

The Rainbow City agreement places another Aberdeen business inside the campaign rather than treating corporate support as a one-off sponsorship transaction.

For independent cultural organisations, multi-year business commitments can provide a different form of income from ticket sales or public grants. Ticket revenue depends upon programming, audience numbers and capacity. Grants are generally attached to particular funding periods, eligibility requirements or projects. Corporate partnerships can provide another stream alongside them.

The arrangement does not remove the Arts Centre's dependence on successful fundraising. Even after the Rainbow commitment is included, more than half of the campaign target remains outstanding.

It does, however, give the venue £30,000 of income that it can now account for across the next three years rather than having to raise that amount separately.

Julia Smith, fundraising manager at Aberdeen Arts Centre, said the partnership would support the centre's performances, creative-learning classes and artist-development work.

"The arts should be accessible to everyone, no matter their background or circumstance, and Rainbow City Taxis' generous donation will help to provide a space for local people to learn, perform, and enjoy live entertainment in Aberdeen," she said.

The campaign is approaching its halfway point

The £279,000 raised so far leaves the campaign approximately £51,000 short of the £330,000 that would represent half of its overall target.

The remaining £381,000 is considerably larger than the amount already committed by any one company announced in the latest partnership. At the equivalent of Rainbow City Taxis' £30,000 commitment, it would require almost 13 further partnerships of the same value to close the remaining gap entirely.

The actual funding mix is broader. Public donations, charitable grants, foundations and other businesses have all contributed to the total, allowing larger institutional awards to sit alongside smaller individual contributions.

That mixture also spreads the financial dependence of the campaign across different sources. A lost grant, weaker individual giving or the absence of corporate support does not necessarily remove the entire funding base, although each affects the amount that must be found elsewhere.

The next £381,000 will determine the outcome

Rainbow City Taxis' commitment arrives after the campaign has moved beyond its initial phase and accumulated more than a quarter of a million pounds.

The arithmetic now changes with every new commitment. The original £660,000 requirement has been reduced to approximately £381,000. Reaching the halfway point would require another £51,000. After that, the campaign would still have £330,000 to secure.

For Rainbow City Taxis, the commitment is fixed: £30,000 over three years.

For Aberdeen Arts Centre, it becomes one component of a considerably larger funding structure being assembled contribution by contribution.

More than £279,000 of that structure is now in place.

POLICY AND GOVERNMENT | 9 September 2026

Scotland Plans 150,000 Apprenticeships. Parliament Has Reopened the Question of Where the Money Goes

Read online: <https://modern.scot/scotland-plans-150000-apprenticeships-parliament-has-reopened-the-question-of-where-the-money-goes/>



The Scottish Government intends to fund at least 150,000 apprenticeships over the next five years. As it prepares for that expansion, an older argument over the way apprenticeship money moves between government, managing organisations and colleges has returned to Parliament. In one established plumbing scheme, 40 per cent of the public contribution is retained by the industry managing organisation and 60 per cent is paid to colleges. The organisation says the retained money pays for work that colleges do not perform. Scotland is now reviewing the funding

system while responsibility for apprenticeships is being transferred to the Scottish Funding Council.

On 8 September, Scotland's new education secretary appeared before the Scottish Parliament's Education and Gaelic Committee to discuss a programme that will substantially expand work-based learning during the current parliamentary term. The government has committed to funding at least 150,000 apprenticeships, increasing Graduate Apprenticeship opportunities and introducing an Apprenticeship Accelerator Grant intended particularly to support smaller employers.

During the evidence session, the discussion returned to a less visible part of the system: what happens to the public contribution after an apprenticeship has been approved. MSP George Adam referred to evidence given during scrutiny of Scotland's recent tertiary education reforms, when an industry managing organisation confirmed that it retained 40 per cent of the Skills Development Scotland contribution associated with apprenticeships it managed while paying 60 per cent to the colleges providing part of the training.

In May 2025, Stephanie Lowe of the Scottish and Northern Ireland Plumbing Employers' Federation told a parliamentary committee how SNIPEF Training Services manages the Modern Apprenticeship in Plumbing and Heating. Asked directly what proportion of the public contribution was passed to colleges, she said 60 per cent. The remaining 40 per cent was retained by the managing organisation.

Lowe did not describe that 40 per cent as profit. She explained that the managing organisation undertook work throughout the apprenticeship: dealing with employers, apprentices and colleges; conducting quarterly reviews; providing regional training officers; supporting employers; mediating where difficulties arose; monitoring the qualification; and helping apprentices complete the programme. SNIPEF is a not-for-profit employers' federation, and it later objected to portrayals of the retained contribution as simply a management fee.

That evidence places Scotland's apprenticeship funding model somewhere more complicated than a choice between money being spent on training or being removed from it. The public contribution can pay for several

functions before, during and around the formal teaching itself.

The apprentice does not receive the training contribution

Modern Apprenticeships are jobs. The apprentice is employed and paid by an employer while working towards an approved qualification. Public money does not normally arrive as a payment to the apprentice. Skills Development Scotland currently administers a government contribution towards training and assessment costs and pays the contracted learning provider.

The amount varies considerably. Current contribution rates depend upon the apprentice's age, qualification level and occupational framework. Published rates range from hundreds of pounds to more than £10,000 over the training period. Skills Development Scotland's programme specification divides payment between stages including commencement, milestones and completion rather than treating the contribution as an unrestricted lump sum.

About £90 million a year of public money is currently associated with the Skills Development Scotland contribution to Modern Apprenticeships. Wider apprenticeship expenditure also passes through the Scottish Funding Council and the Student Awards Agency Scotland because Foundation and Graduate Apprenticeships operate differently.

The system therefore contains several types of apprenticeship, multiple funding institutions, hundreds of providers and thousands of employers. The Scottish Government said in June that it was investing £198 million annually across approximately 25,500 new Modern Apprenticeships, 5,000 Foundation Apprenticeships and more than 1,500 new Graduate Apprenticeships, as well as supporting Modern Apprentices already in training.

Managing organisations occupy a particular place in the system

Some industries have developed organisations that sit between the public funder, employers, apprentices and the institution delivering formal training. Their purpose is particularly apparent in sectors dominated by small businesses. A microbusiness employing one apprentice may not have a human-resources department, training manager or administrative staff capable of managing a multi-year qualification, funding claims, assessments and regulatory requirements.

In the plumbing scheme described to Parliament, SNIPEF Training Services carries out that coordinating role. Lowe told MSPs that without the organisation's work many employers would not take apprentices at all. The organisation deals with the college relationship while providing continuing industry oversight of the apprenticeship.

Parliament's subsequent Stage 1 report recorded that Skills Development Scotland contracts with three lead providers of this kind: SNIPEF, the Scottish Electrical Charitable Training Trust and the Construction Industry Training Board. Together they were responsible for approximately 10 per cent of apprenticeship starts at the time of the evidence.

Skills Development Scotland told the committee that describing money retained by these organisations simply as a management fee would be inaccurate because it paid for activities required to deliver and support the apprenticeship.

The committee nevertheless identified a question about value for money. Its report recorded ministerial concern about cases in which a managing organisation subcontracts formal training to a college for less than half the value of the public contribution and the college then uses publicly funded credits to provide the

teaching. The concern was that, in such circumstances, two different streams of public support could contribute to the same apprenticeship.

Scotland has already compared the system with England and Wales

The parliamentary inquiry also examined how intermediary costs are treated elsewhere in Britain. Its Stage 1 report stated that managing-agent retention was capped at 15 per cent in England and 10 per cent in Wales, where the agent also had to be a registered charity. Scotland's arrangements were not structured around the same universal cap.

The comparison is not exact because apprenticeship systems differ between the three nations. Scotland funds apprenticeships through its own frameworks, institutions and contribution rates. Industry bodies also argue that the services being purchased cannot be reduced to administration alone.

The evidence nevertheless exposed something rarely visible in public discussion of apprenticeship numbers. When government announces money for apprenticeships, the route between the national budget and the person learning a trade can contain several organisations performing different parts of the job.

There is no reason in principle why that arrangement must be inefficient. Specialist industry organisations can possess relationships with employers and technical knowledge that a general educational institution does not. Equally, the existence of a useful intermediary does not establish what its work should cost. That requires information about expenditure, outcomes and the services delivered for each part of the public contribution.

The system is about to change hands

Scotland is already restructuring who controls apprenticeship funding. Legislation passed during the previous parliamentary session transfers responsibility for securing and funding national training programmes and apprenticeships from Skills Development Scotland to the Scottish Funding Council. The new powers are due to commence in April 2027.

The transfer places apprenticeship funding alongside the institution already responsible for funding Scotland's colleges and universities. That creates the possibility of a more integrated tertiary system, but it also changes relationships with private and industry training providers that have developed under Skills Development Scotland.

During scrutiny of the legislation, trade unions and other witnesses warned that the Scottish Funding Council would require sufficient expertise and capacity to oversee a provider network much broader than colleges and universities. Evidence to Parliament indicated that independent training providers delivered the majority of Modern Apprenticeships, while colleges accounted for a substantially smaller share.

The government is separately reviewing Modern Apprenticeship contribution rates. The review began in 2026 and is examining a system whose rates evolved through earlier reforms dating back more than a decade. Its terms of reference include value for money and transparency as well as the differences between occupational frameworks.

Expansion changes the scale of the financial question

The commitment to at least 150,000 apprenticeships over the parliamentary term is not simply a continuation of the present system. It requires a sustained increase in opportunities while Scotland is

simultaneously changing the institution responsible for funding them.

The demand for skilled workers is substantial. Skills Development Scotland estimates that Scotland will require around 1.3 million workers over the coming decade as older workers leave the labour market and major investment programmes create new demand. Construction, energy, engineering, care, digital industries and other sectors already report shortages in particular occupations.

Expanding apprenticeship numbers therefore involves more than finding additional applicants. Employers have to be willing to employ them. Training capacity has to exist. Qualified assessors and teaching staff are required. Small firms have to be able to absorb wage costs. Industry frameworks have to remain relevant as technology changes.

The financing system determines how much of the public contribution is available for each of those functions.

The plumbing example also demonstrates why a national percentage alone cannot answer the question. If the managing organisation disappeared and the 40 per cent were transferred directly to a college, somebody would still have to perform the employer liaison, reviews, monitoring and industry coordination described to Parliament. The relevant calculation is therefore not how much an intermediary retains, but how much each necessary function costs, whether it is being performed efficiently, and whether the same function is already being funded elsewhere.

That information is harder to obtain for private and industry organisations than for colleges. Parliamentary witnesses have previously pointed to differences in freedom-of-information requirements and public scrutiny. The forthcoming transfer to the Scottish Funding Council will place a larger and more varied provider system under an organisation whose own accountability arrangements were designed primarily around institutional funding.

Scotland has now committed itself to producing substantially more apprenticeships while reviewing their contribution rates, reorganising their national funding authority and reconsidering relationships between colleges and independent providers.

The number 150,000 will eventually be easy to count. The more difficult account will follow the money beneath it: what Scotland paid, which organisations received it, what each organisation did for its share, how many apprentices completed, and whether the resulting skills were the ones the economy needed.

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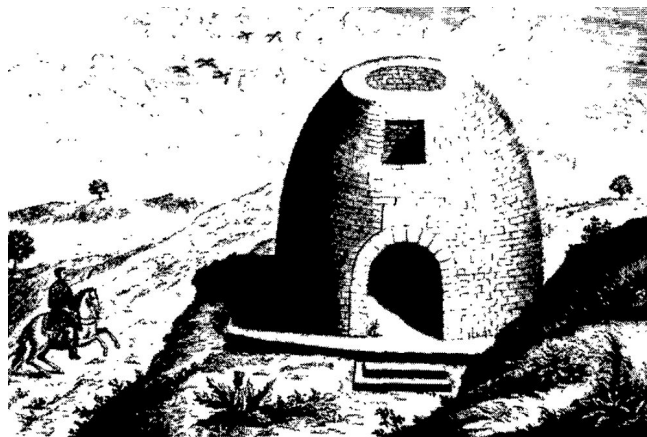
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HERITAGE AND ARTS | 10 September 2026

Scotland Preserved a Roman Monument for 1,500 Years. It Took One Landowner to Destroy It in 1743.

Read online: <https://modern.scot/scotland-preserved-a-roman-monument-for-1500-years-it-took-one-landowner-to-destroy-it-in-1743/>



Until the middle of the eighteenth century, an extraordinary Roman stone building stood near Stenhousemuir beside the eastern end of the Antonine Wall. Known for centuries as Arthur's O'on, it had survived the end of Roman rule, the formation of medieval Scotland and generations of agricultural change. Antiquaries measured it, drew it and argued about what the Romans had built it for. Then, in 1743, Sir Michael Bruce of Stenhouse had it dismantled. Its stones were taken to build a dam on the River Carron. Five years later, a flood carried much of them away.

When Sir Robert Sibbald examined the Roman antiquities of Scotland at the beginning of the eighteenth century, there was one structure near the River Carron that required little excavation or imagination. It was still standing.

Arthur's O'on was a small circular stone building near Stenhouse, a short distance from the eastern end of the Antonine Wall. Its walls rose vertically before curving inward into a corbelled stone dome. An opening remained at the top. The entrance was narrow and the masonry substantial. Although its original Roman purpose had already been forgotten, the building itself had endured sufficiently well for eighteenth-century observers to enter, measure and draw it.

Its survival was exceptional. Roman Scotland is now encountered largely through foundations, earthworks, ditches, roads, inscriptions and objects recovered by archaeology. Arthur's O'on belonged to another category. Here was a Roman structure surviving above ground to something close to its original height more than a millennium after the Roman army had withdrawn from northern Britain.

It survived until 1743.

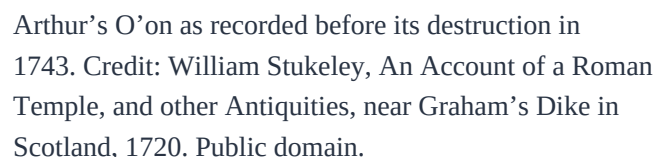
A Roman building beside the Antonine frontier

The building stood in the landscape around Stenhouse and Carron, close to the eastern sector of the Antonine Wall. The wall had been constructed during the reign of Antoninus Pius after Roman forces advanced north from Hadrian's Wall in the second century AD. Running for roughly 60 kilometres between the Firth of Forth and the Clyde, it marked the northern frontier of the Roman Empire for part of the second century.

The country around the eastern end of the frontier contained forts, roads, temporary camps and other traces of Roman military occupation. Carriden, Mumrills, Rough Castle and Camelon formed part of the wider archaeological landscape. Arthur's O'on stood south of the wall itself, near the Roman road system and the River Carron.

Its appearance was unusual enough to generate its name. The Scots word “O’on” or “Oven” reflected the resemblance of the domed building to an oven. The association with Arthur belonged to a much wider medieval and early-modern tendency to attach the legendary British king’s name to ancient structures whose true origins were no longer understood.

The antiquaries nevertheless understood that the building was Roman and that its preservation was unusual.



They measured it before it disappeared

The early eighteenth century produced a surprisingly substantial record of Arthur's O'on. In 1719, the architect Andrews Jelfe examined the monument on behalf of the English antiquary William Stukeley and prepared measured drawings. Alexander Gordon subsequently included the structure in his *Itinerarium Septentrionale*, published in 1726, an ambitious survey of Roman remains in northern Britain.

Gordon regarded the building as a Roman *sacellum*, or small sacred structure. Other interpretations followed. The monument appeared on maps and in antiquarian correspondence and became known among scholars studying Roman Britain.

Those drawings eventually acquired a value their makers could not have intended. They became evidence for a building that later generations would never be able to examine.

Modern archaeological records still depend substantially upon observations made before 1743. Dimensions, construction, appearance and some of the reported internal features survive because eighteenth-century scholars recorded them before the structure was destroyed.

The case is an early example of a problem that would repeatedly confront archaeology: documentation becoming the surviving monument after the monument itself has gone.

Sir Michael Bruce wanted the stone

Arthur's O'on stood on the estate of Stenhouse, which came into the possession of Sir Michael Bruce. In 1743, Bruce ordered the building to be dismantled.

The reason was practical. Stone was required for a dam or weir associated with a mill on the River Carron.

The Roman masonry was available nearby. The building was deliberately taken apart and its stone transported for reuse in the new structure. A Roman monument that had remained standing for perhaps fifteen centuries was converted into construction material.

Stone reuse was hardly unusual in Scotland. Medieval castles, abbeys, churches and Roman structures were repeatedly quarried after losing their original functions. Dressed stone represented labour already performed. Where a ruin no longer possessed an economic purpose, its masonry could be more valuable than the structure it formed.

Arthur's O'on was unusual because antiquaries had already recognised what it was before the demolition occurred.

The destruction caused outrage at the time

The loss was not discovered generations later by archaeologists wondering what had happened. Bruce's contemporaries protested.

Sir John Clerk of Penicuik, one of Scotland's most knowledgeable eighteenth-century antiquaries, reacted with anger. Clerk had spent years studying Roman remains and understood the unusual character of the building. In correspondence with the antiquary Roger Gale, he condemned Bruce's decision and complained that the stone obtained from the monument could have been acquired cheaply elsewhere.

Arthur's O'on was not destroyed in an age when nobody understood that ancient monuments possessed historical value. Some of the most knowledgeable people in Scotland understood precisely what was being

lost. The disagreement reflected competing ideas about the value of old structures. There was no system of statutory monument protection capable of resolving that conflict in favour of preservation. Britain would not develop comprehensive legal protection for ancient monuments until much later. The Ancient Monuments Protection Act of 1882, almost 140 years after Arthur's O'on was destroyed, represented the first significant national statutory attempt to protect selected prehistoric monuments. The system that eventually produced scheduled-monument protection developed through later legislation.

In 1743, antiquaries could object. They could not prevent the owner from dismantling the building.

Then the stones disappeared for a second time

The masonry taken from Arthur's O'on did not remain permanently incorporated into the mill dam.

In the summer of 1748, about five years after the demolition, flooding on the River Carron damaged or destroyed the structure into which much of the Roman stone had been placed. Accounts of the episode report that a considerable part of the reused masonry was swept away.

The chronology is sometimes compressed into a story in which the dam was destroyed immediately after the Roman monument was demolished. The surviving accounts place the flood several years later.

The result was nevertheless severe. The monument had first been dismantled into individual stones and those stones were then dispersed again by the river.

Material that might otherwise have survived in a later wall, bridge or estate building became substantially harder to identify.

By the middle of the eighteenth century, Arthur's O'on had therefore disappeared not only as architecture but largely as recoverable masonry.

One antiquarian family decided to build it again

The reaction of the Clerk family at Penicuik produced one of the strangest episodes in the monument's history.

Sir John Clerk's son, Sir James Clerk, commissioned a reconstruction of Arthur's O'on on the family estate at Penicuik. The replica was based upon the surviving measurements and drawings of the Roman building and was incorporated into the stable complex associated with Penicuik House.

It was adapted as a dovecot.

The reconstruction survives. Historic Environment Scotland includes the structure within the Category A-listed former stable block at Penicuik House and records its design as a replica of Arthur's O'on.

The loss made later interpretation much harder

Had Arthur's O'on survived into the modern archaeological period, the questions surrounding it could have been approached with methods unavailable to Sibbald, Gordon, Jelfe and Clerk.

Its masonry could have been examined geologically. Construction sequences might have been identified. Mortar could potentially have provided chronological evidence. The ground around and beneath the building could have been excavated systematically. Finds could have been recorded by archaeological context rather than collected as isolated curiosities.

The relationship between the building and the Antonine Wall landscape might also have been investigated with modern survey techniques.

Instead, scholars are required to reconstruct the monument from drawings, measurements, descriptions, scattered reports of finds and the archaeological evidence surviving around its former site.

This is one reason its purpose remains debated.

The traditional description of Arthur's O'on as a temple is plausible but not certain. Gordon's interpretation of it as a sacellum belonged to eighteenth-century Roman scholarship. Later researchers have considered whether its architecture and position might be better understood as a commemorative or victory monument.

One possibility associates it with the Roman advance under Quintus Lollius Urbicus, governor of Britain during the reign of Antoninus Pius. Urbicus led the campaign that preceded construction of the Antonine Wall in the AD 140s. A monumental structure near the frontier could conceivably have commemorated Roman military success or imperial authority.

The evidence does not permit the building to be assigned confidently to that interpretation. The demolition removed much of what might have allowed the competing theories to be tested.

Its name survived better than its purpose

Arthur's O'on had already acquired layers of folklore before antiquaries identified it as Roman. Its association with King Arthur belongs to a broad family of British place names in which ancient monuments became connected with legendary figures after knowledge of their original builders had disappeared.

The "O'on" element was more descriptive. The domed form resembled an oven, providing an immediately understandable name for an otherwise inexplicable stone building.

That folk name survived the rediscovery of its Roman origins. Eighteenth-century scholars could discuss Roman temples and military monuments while continuing to call the structure Arthur's O'on.

The combination is characteristic of early antiquarian Scotland. Classical scholarship, local memory, medieval legend and physical archaeology existed alongside one another rather than replacing each other cleanly.

Stenhouse itself belonged to a changing landscape

The destruction occurred during a century in which Scottish landowners were substantially remaking the countryside. Estates were reorganised, fields enclosed, roads redirected, woodland planted, mills developed and agricultural production altered. Ancient structures could become obstacles, quarries or convenient sources of material within that process.

The Stenhouse landscape changed as well. Later estate development altered roads and approaches around the property. Industrialisation transformed the wider Carron valley even more dramatically.

Only a few years after Arthur's O'on disappeared, the Carron Company was founded in 1759. Its ironworks became one of the most important industrial enterprises in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Scotland, producing cannon, machinery and the short naval gun that gave the carronade its name.

The district in which a Roman monument had survived through the medieval period was entering one of the most intensive periods of industrial change in Scottish history.

The Antonine Wall itself would suffer from similar pressures. Agriculture, roads, canals, housing, industry and later urban expansion altered or destroyed sections of the frontier. Other Roman remains were excavated without modern recording or simply removed.

Arthur's O'on disappeared shortly before that transformation accelerated.

Scotland had no machinery to save it

The history of monument protection in Scotland developed long after the antiquarian movement had begun documenting what was being lost. By the nineteenth century, archaeological and historical societies were creating increasingly systematic records, but ownership rights remained powerful and statutory protection limited.

The first Ancient Monuments Protection Act of 1882 covered only a restricted selection of monuments. Later legislation expanded state powers and eventually produced the scheduling system through which nationally important archaeological sites can now receive legal protection.

The Antonine Wall is today part of the Frontiers of the Roman Empire World Heritage Site. Surviving forts, stretches of rampart and ditch, camps and associated remains are protected and studied through archaeological and planning systems that did not exist when Bruce ordered his workmen to dismantle Arthur's O'on.

Had the building survived another century and a half, its fate would almost certainly have been different.

The original survives largely on paper

There is no standing Roman dome at Stenhouse today. What remains of Arthur's O'on is dispersed across several kinds of evidence.

Sibbald's 1707 account preserves the observations of a scholar who saw the building. Jelfe's measurements preserve its dimensions. Gordon's *Itinerarium Septentrionale* records it within the early study of Roman Britain. Antiquarian correspondence records the anger surrounding its destruction. Archaeological inventories preserve the former location and later interpretations. The Penicuik reconstruction preserves an eighteenth-century attempt to reproduce its architecture.

Together they make Arthur's O'on unusually well documented for a monument destroyed nearly three centuries ago.

They cannot provide what the building itself would have provided.

The most consequential part of the loss is not that modern Scotland lacks an impressive Roman curiosity. It is the archaeological information contained within the original masonry, foundations and surrounding ground that disappeared before scientific archaeology could examine it.

By 1743, Scotland already had scholars capable of recognising that information as part of the country's history. They could measure the monument, draw it, correspond about it and protest against its destruction.

They could not stop its owner taking it apart.

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The Famous Mr. Buchinger

Read online: <https://modern.scot/the-famous-mr-buchinger-scotlands-forgotten-micro-artist/>



In April 1723, a German artist named Matthias Buchinger was working in Edinburgh. He made drawings on vellum so intricate that some of their writing could barely be read without magnification. He produced religious texts, coats of arms and family trees for Scottish patrons, advertised himself publicly in the city and demonstrated writing forwards, backwards, upside down and in mirror form. Some of his Scottish works survive. Others have passed through private collections and auction rooms. For much of modern Scottish art history, he has remained almost invisible.

Matthias Buchinger arrived in Scotland already carrying a reputation. Born near Nuremberg in 1674, he travelled widely through Europe before reaching Britain, where he built a career that combined calligraphy, drawing, performance and public exhibition. His work could be astonishingly small. Letters became ornament. Prayers became hair, borders and architectural detail. Heraldry could be built from lines so fine that the image appeared conventional until examined closely.

By the early 1720s, London advertisements were calling him “the Famous Mr. Buchinger”. In Edinburgh, however, the surviving evidence allows something more precise than reputation. It places him physically in the city, working for named Scots, producing dated objects and advertising where he could be seen.

One surviving handbill from 1723 announced that “Matthew Buchinger” had arrived in Edinburgh and could be seen at Mrs Mackay’s at the foot of Blackfriars Wynd. The bill presented him as “The Wonder of the World” and advertised the exceptional nature of his bodily condition and artistic abilities. The collector Ricky Jay later believed the surviving copy might be unique.

The notice belonged to a world in which artists, performers, musicians, automata, curiosities and demonstrations circulated through cities before modern museums or commercial galleries had assumed their later forms. Buchinger did not depend upon one patron or one institution. He could work for aristocrats, merchants and members of the public, sell individual examples of calligraphy and use performance itself as part of his livelihood.



The arms of the Douglas family of Whiteriggs, drawn and written by Matthias Buchinger in Aberdeen on 12 February 1730. The elaborate heraldic composition bears the motto *Fortis et Æquus* — “Brave and Just” — and is signed by Buchinger beneath the design. Credit: Matthias Buchinger, Aberdeen, 1730.



The arms of George Gordon, 3rd Duke of Gordon, drawn by Matthias Buchinger in Edinburgh on 25 April 1723. The composition carries the Gordon mottoes *Bydand* — “steadfast” or “abiding” — and *Animo non Astutia*, “By courage, not cunning.” Credit: Matthias Buchinger, Edinburgh, 1723.

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Edinburgh left a dated trail of his work

On 23 April 1723, Buchinger completed an elaborate manuscript on vellum in Edinburgh containing the Ten Commandments, the Apostles’ Creed and the Lord’s Prayer. The composition placed the texts within an architectural frame and included Hebrew and Greek lettering. The sheet measured only around 15 by 12 centimetres.

The work was personalised for John Thomson, a merchant in Edinburgh, and his wife Elizabeth Ronaldson. Buchinger adapted the composition by adding a small family record naming the couple and their children.

Two days later, on 25 April, he completed another Scottish commission: the coat of arms of George Gordon, 3rd Duke of Gordon.

The surviving drawing is approximately 18 by 15 centimetres and was executed in pen and brown ink over a graphite underdrawing. It carries the Gordon arms with two deerhounds as supporters, a stag’s head as crest and the mottoes “Bydand” and “Animo non Astutia”. The sheet is now associated with the Ricky Jay collection and has been exhibited through the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The Duke himself was still a child. Cosmo George Gordon had been born in 1720 and inherited the dukedom in infancy. The commission therefore belonged less to personal portraiture than to the visual culture of lineage, rank and family identity that surrounded aristocratic households.

For Buchinger, heraldry was ideal material. Coats of arms already depended upon systems of symbols, animals, text, mottoes and geometry. His skill lay in compressing complex information into spaces that rewarded close inspection.

His writing could run in every direction

Buchinger also sold demonstrations of penmanship.

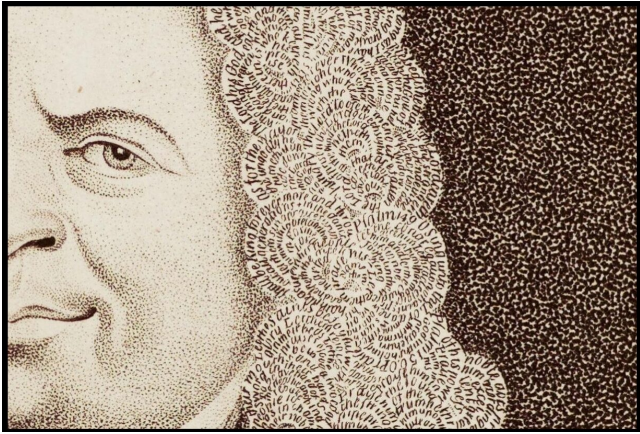
A surviving calligraphic specimen made in Edinburgh on 30 April 1723 shows him writing forwards, backwards, upside down and in mirror form. The sheet is only around 15 by 18 centimetres. Beneath an ornamental alphabet, he signed himself and recorded that he had been born in Germany in 1674.

The work reveals the commercial side of his practice. Not every piece was a large commission. Buchinger could produce smaller demonstrations of virtuosity that functioned almost like portable performances. A purchaser did not simply acquire handwriting. The object preserved proof of an event: the artist had demonstrated something difficult and unusual in front of an audience.

This mattered because much of Buchinger's reputation depended upon direct encounter. Printed descriptions circulated widely, but his appeal came from people seeing him work and then carrying away an object that authenticated what they had witnessed.



V0007015ER Matthias Buchinger, a phocomelic. Stipple engraving.
Credit: Wellcome Library, London.



Detail from Matthias Buchinger's celebrated micrographic self-portrait. The curls of his hair are formed from minute handwritten passages of biblical text, including the Lord's Prayer and seven Psalms, turning words almost invisible to the naked eye into part of the portrait itself. Credit: Matthias Buchinger, 1724. Public domain.

He returned to Scotland and produced his largest family tree

Buchinger's Scottish connection continued after 1723. By the winter of 1727–28 he was again based largely in Edinburgh, where surviving works show a different scale of ambition.

One of the most remarkable is a family tree of the Stewarts of Allanton and the Denhams of Edinburgh, dated 10 May 1729. Drawn in pen and ink on vellum, it measures roughly 30 by 40 centimetres and is the largest and most elaborate family tree currently associated with Buchinger's surviving work.

The composition commemorates the marriage of Sir Thomas Stewart and Susanna Denham in 1677. Two genealogical trees are organised around heraldic material and surrounded by ornamental borders and Latin mottoes. The amount of text is unusually large for Buchinger, turning the family's ancestry into both document and image.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art describes the work as evidence of Buchinger's close relationships with Scottish patrons during this period. The sheet also preserves something less visible: the appetite among Scottish elite families for genealogy as art.

Genealogy was not merely information. It was status made visible. A family tree demonstrated descent, connection, legitimacy and continuity. Buchinger transformed those claims into intricate objects that could be displayed, preserved and inherited.

Scotland suited his art unusually well

The Scottish commissions reveal how closely Buchinger's practice matched the interests of early eighteenth-century patrons.

Heraldry remained central to aristocratic identity. Family genealogy was politically and socially useful. Religious texts still occupied an important place in domestic visual culture. Calligraphy itself possessed prestige in a period when handwriting was a practical skill but elaborate penmanship remained an art.

Buchinger could combine all of these things.

His work also arrived in Scotland at a moment of considerable institutional and social change. The Union of 1707 was still recent. Edinburgh remained the legal, intellectual and administrative centre of Scotland, while aristocratic families were renegotiating their relationship with London, Westminster and the wider British state.

In that setting, heraldic and genealogical art retained particular force. A coat of arms or family tree could

assert continuity at precisely the moment political structures around the family were changing.

Buchinger did not need to be Scottish to participate in that culture. His foreignness was part of his appeal. He brought an established continental tradition of micrography, calligraphy and virtuoso penmanship into a society already accustomed to international artistic exchange.

One of his Scottish works is still in a national collection

Scotland itself retains at least one substantial Buchinger work.

The National Galleries of Scotland holds an Altarpiece dated 1728, executed in pen and brown ink on vellum. The sheet measures approximately 35 by 25 centimetres and is currently in storage rather than on permanent display.

The work belongs to the same period in which Buchinger was active in Edinburgh and demonstrates that his Scottish years were not confined to heraldic commissions or performance pieces.

Its survival in a national collection is important because much of Buchinger's work has passed through private hands. His drawings are portable, relatively small and highly collectible. Their provenance often moves through individuals, dealers and auctions rather than remaining attached to the places in which they were made.

Much of the surviving Scottish evidence ended up far from Scotland

The dispersal of Buchinger's Scottish work is one reason his place in Scottish art history is easy to miss.

The Duke of Gordon drawing is associated with the Ricky Jay collection and has been shown through the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. The Stewart–Denham family tree followed a private collecting history that included sale at Sotheby's in London in 1983 and again in 2021. Buchinger's Edinburgh calligraphic specimens have likewise appeared in specialist auction catalogues.

These are not objects most Scottish readers encounter in national museum displays.

The evidence survives across several different systems: major museum collections, private holdings, auction records, old printed handbills, manuscript catalogues and specialist studies of calligraphy and performance.

That dispersal creates an unusual historical problem. An artist can have spent years working in Scotland, produced substantial Scottish commissions and left material connected to Edinburgh families, yet remain marginal in conventional accounts of Scottish art because the surviving objects no longer sit together.

Buchinger was also performing himself

His reputation cannot be separated from the way his body was presented to audiences.

Buchinger was born without fully formed hands or feet. Contemporary advertisements repeatedly foregrounded this fact, sometimes using language that would now be recognised as spectacle marketing. He was promoted under names including the "Little Man of Nuremberg" and "The Wonder of the World".

Yet the surviving work resists reducing him to that spectacle.

He was a technically sophisticated artist who built a long international career from precision drawing, calligraphy, music, performance and personal branding. His clientele ranged from ordinary paying spectators to aristocratic patrons. He travelled extensively and repeatedly produced signed, dated objects identifying the

city in which he made them.

The Scottish works therefore preserve two histories at once. They belong to the history of disability and public performance, but they also belong to the history of drawing, typography, heraldry and manuscript art.

The two cannot be separated cleanly because Buchinger himself did not separate them. His artistic ability was part of the public demonstration through which he earned his living.

His micrography turned language into image

Buchinger is most famous for micrography: the construction of visual forms from extremely small writing.

His best-known self-portrait uses minute script within the curls of his wig. Under magnification, what first appears to be decorative line becomes text.

The technique belongs to an older artistic tradition in which written language could function simultaneously as image and meaning. Buchinger pushed that relationship toward virtuosity. Viewers could appreciate the overall composition from a distance and then discover another level of information when approaching closely.

That made his art unusually suited to private possession. A patron did not exhaust the object at first glance. The work rewarded handling, close viewing and repeated inspection.

His Scottish family trees use the same principle at a larger scale. Names, dates, descent and family history become the structure from which the image itself is built.

The Edinburgh handbill may be almost unique

One of the rarest surviving pieces of evidence for Buchinger's Scottish career is not a drawing but an advertisement.

The 1723 Edinburgh handbill announcing his appearance at Mrs Mackay's at the foot of Blackfriars Wynd survives as a single printed sheet approximately 20 by 16 centimetres. It includes a woodcut image of Buchinger and describes the abilities audiences could expect to see.

An account of the handbill appeared in The Scots Magazine in 1807, where the writer believed the surviving example to be unique. Ricky Jay, who later owned the sheet, reached a similar conclusion.

The address provides a rare geographical anchor for the story.

Blackfriars Wynd ran through Edinburgh's Old Town from the High Street towards the Cowgate. Buchinger was therefore not operating from an abstract aristocratic court or secluded workshop. He was advertising himself in one of the busiest urban environments in Scotland.

People could read the notice, find the address and go to see him.

His Scottish work sits between fine art and popular entertainment

Modern categories make Buchinger harder to place than he would have been in his own lifetime.

He was a draftsman, calligrapher and micrographer, but also a performer. He produced objects of extraordinary technical refinement while advertising himself through handbills and public demonstrations. He accepted elite commissions but also sold smaller examples of his work.

His career therefore crossed boundaries that later museum culture would separate more sharply.

A coat of arms might now be catalogued as a drawing. A calligraphic specimen could be treated as manuscript material. A handbill belongs to print history. A public appearance belongs to performance history. A family tree belongs partly to genealogy. A religious composition might be treated as devotional art.

Buchinger moved across all of those forms without difficulty.

The survival of his work has been accidental and uneven

His Scottish commissions survive because particular owners kept them.

Vellum is durable, but small works on vellum are also easily dispersed, sold, inherited or lost. A coat of arms can remain in a family collection for generations and then enter the art market. A handbill can survive because somebody pasted it into an album. A family tree can pass through collectors without remaining publicly visible.

The resulting record is fragmented rather than absent.

That makes Buchinger different from an artist represented by a coherent archive or a body of paintings hanging in Scottish public collections. His Scottish career has to be reconstructed from objects now scattered across institutions and sales records.

The dates nevertheless form a clear pattern.

Edinburgh, April 1723: religious manuscript, heraldic commission, calligraphic demonstrations and a public advertisement.

Edinburgh, 1728 and 1729: larger and increasingly complex works, including the surviving altarpiece and genealogical commissions.

The pattern establishes something more substantial than a travelling performer passing briefly through Scotland. Buchinger returned, worked for Scottish patrons and produced some of the most elaborate surviving objects of his career there.

One Scottish commission preserves an entire social world in miniature

The Stewart–Denham family tree may be the clearest example.

Its subject is not simply ancestry. The names within it represent marriages, estates, inheritance and relationships through which elite Scottish society organised itself. Buchinger turned that network into a single decorative object small enough to be held in two hands.

In another century, comparable information might have been painted on a large genealogical panel or carved into a monument. Buchinger compressed it into vellum and ink.

That compression is characteristic of his entire career. Large claims were made small: religious belief, aristocratic lineage, national identity, personal virtuosity.

The Scottish works remain technically remarkable, but their historical value lies equally in what they preserve around the art itself. They record who commissioned art, what those patrons wanted represented and how an itinerant European artist could make a living in early eighteenth-century Edinburgh.

Scotland has part of the story. The rest is scattered

The National Galleries of Scotland still holds Buchinger's 1728 Altarpiece. Edinburgh's streets retain the geography through which he moved, even where buildings and wynds have changed. Scottish family names remain embedded in the surviving commissions.

Much of the material evidence, however, now lies elsewhere.

Some works are in American collections. Others have moved through London auction houses. The handbill associated with his Edinburgh appearances belonged to a private collector. The archival trail extends across manuscript catalogues and specialist collections far beyond Scotland.

For an artist whose work depended upon extreme concentration and minute detail, Buchinger left an unusually dispersed historical footprint.

Three centuries later, that footprint can still be reconstructed closely enough to place him in Edinburgh on individual days.

On 23 April 1723 he completed a religious manuscript for an Edinburgh merchant. On 25 April he completed the Duke of Gordon's arms. On 30 April he produced another calligraphic specimen. Six years later, in May 1729, he signed one of his largest genealogical works in the same city.

Those surviving dates preserve a small artistic world that has largely disappeared from view: an eighteenth-century Edinburgh in which a German micrographer could arrive with a handbill, set up in Blackfriars Wynd, attract paying audiences and Scottish patrons, and leave behind works so fine that three hundred years later they still require magnification to reveal everything he put into them.

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Written by Matthew Buchinger — Calligraphic Specimen Sotheby's, The Ricky Jay Collection — Edinburgh, 30 April 1723; sale catalogue 2021

<https://www.sothebys.com/en/buy/auction/2021/the-ricky-jay-collection/buchinger-matthias-written-by-matthew-buchinger>

The Largest and Most Elaborate of Buchinger's Family Trees Sotheby's, The Ricky Jay Collection — Edinburgh, 10 May 1729; sale catalogue 2021

<https://www.sothebys.com/en/buy/auction/2021/the-ricky-jay-collection/buchinger-matthias-the-largest-and-most-elaborate>

Featured Item: Matthias Buchinger Blackie House Library and Museum — 2025

<https://blackiehouse.org/featured-item/featured-item-2025-buchinger/>

TEA WITH GUNNS | 10 September 2026

Apparently, Backgammon is Fashionable Again

Read online: <https://modern.scot/apparently-backgammon-is-fashionable-again/>



I discovered on Tuesday morning that backgammon is fashionable again. I was having my second cup of tea and reading about the things fashionable people are doing when I came across the news. Backgammon, it seems, has returned to drawing rooms, clubs and fashionable tables, where attractive people are once again moving little counters around expensive boards while looking as though they have understood the rules since birth.

“Backgammon is back,” I told Mr Gunn.

He looked up from his breakfast. “Where did it go?”

“Out of fashion.”

“When?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, how do you know it’s back?”

“Because I’ve just read it.”

Mr Gunn considered this. “Did anybody tell the backgammon board?”

There are times when discussing fashion with Mr Gunn is like discussing soufflés with a Labrador. The basic information is received, but there is no appreciation of its wider significance. I explained that this was not merely people playing an old game. This was a revival. Backgammon was fashionable. There were beautiful boards and beautifully dressed people playing it in places where nobody appeared to have central heating problems.

“We used to try to play backgammon,” he said.

“I know.”

“In the caravan.”

“That is not quite the same.”

“Same game.”

“We had towels drying over the radiator.”

“We were still playing backgammon.”

This was irritating because he was right. Somewhere in the house we owned a backgammon board. We had tried to learn to play it years ago, before evenings became occupied by television subscriptions. I knew exactly where it was.

“It’s in the hall cupboard,” I said.

Mr Gunn stopped eating.

Our hall cupboard is where objects go after their useful lives have ended but before either of us has acquired the courage to throw them away. It contains three umbrellas, none of which can be trusted in weather; a badminton racquet without a shuttlecock; two folding chairs; several scarves belonging to people I no longer recognise; a hot-water bottle without a stopper; and enough unidentified electrical cable to reconnect the Highlands to the National Grid.

“You want me to go in there?”

“I want the backgammon board.”

“Today?”

“It’s fashionable now.”

He went. There was silence for several minutes, followed by a crash, a muttered word I shall not reproduce, and the sudden appearance in the hallway of a Christmas wreath. Mr Gunn eventually emerged carrying a brown case under one arm and a table lamp under the other.

“I found this as well.”

“I wasn’t looking for the lamp.”

“Neither was I.”

He handed me the backgammon board.

It was worse than I remembered. The cream counters had become the colour of old teeth, the stitching was grey and there was a sticky patch in one corner which Mr Gunn identified as Drambuie.

“How would Drambuie get inside a backgammon board?”

“We took it to the MacDonalds’ at New Year.”

“That was in the nineties.”

“Drambuie lasts.”

I smelled the corner and decided there are some historical questions better left unresolved.

By ten o’clock I had the board on the kitchen table with two cloths, cotton buds, warm water and a toothbrush. By noon, I had restored the counters to something approaching their original colour and discovered that the board itself was actually rather handsome.

Unfortunately, cleaning one old object exposes the condition of everything around it. Once the board was clean, the kitchen table looked disgraceful. Once I cleaned the table, I noticed the windowsill. By lunchtime I had polished the table, washed two windows, cleaned the skirting board and removed a mark from the door frame which had outlasted seven prime ministers.

Mr Gunn found me polishing the brass handle on the dining-room door.

“I thought you were cleaning the backgammon board.”

“I did.”

“Why are you cleaning the door?”

“People will be coming through it.”

This seemed perfectly obvious to me.

At about three o’clock, I decided that if we were going to participate in the revival of backgammon, we were going to do it properly. There was no point sitting around in old jumpers throwing dice while Mr Gunn watched television in the next room. Fashion had standards.

I sent a message to the ladies.

Backgammon evening here on Thursday. Seven o’clock. Backgammon is fashionable again. We are dressing up.

Effie replied first.

How much are we playing for?

Nothing. We are not gambling.

Morag appeared next.

What does dressing up mean?

Properly.

Jean asked:

Dinner properly or funeral properly?

Before I could answer, Agnes wrote:

Are we wearing hats?

I had said nothing about hats. This should have been the moment when I stopped it. Instead, I made the mistake of hesitating.

Margaret replied:

I’ll wear one if Agnes is.

Elsbeth then announced that she still had the hat she had bought for Fiona’s wedding, and within five minutes a quiet evening of backgammon had acquired a dress code normally associated with the Royal Enclosure.

Thursday arrived with the kind of Highland weather that regards weather forecasts as a personal challenge. By five o’clock the wind was coming off the hill hard enough to rearrange the bins, and rain was travelling horizontally past the sitting-room windows. Mr Gunn looked outside and asked whether the ladies were still coming.

“Of course they are.”

“In hats?”

I chose not to answer.

I wore a navy dress and pearls. I had put out the restored board, proper glasses, little dishes of nuts and olives, and some cheese biscuits which I transferred from their packet onto a plate so they would not know where they came from. Mr Gunn surveyed the dining room.

“This is all for backgammon?”

“Yes.”

“We used to play it with a packet of crisps.”

“That was before it was fashionable.”

At seven minutes past seven I heard the doorbell.

I couldn't tell which of my friends it was. Something wet, brown and flattened covered most of her head and one side of her face. A long feather was plastered across what I assumed was her forehead.

“Get me inside.”

It was Effie.

I pulled her through the doorway just as another gust came across the garden.

“What happened to you?”

“What do you think happened? Scotland happened.”

I was still staring at the thing on her head. It had clearly begun the evening as a hat. Beyond that, identification was difficult. It looked like an indistinguishable dead animal which had been found at the roadside and persuaded to attend dinner.

“Is that the new hat?”

“It was.”

Effie went directly to the hall mirror.

“Oh, for God's sake.”

Behind her, a man was coming up the path carrying a bottle of wine and what remained of an umbrella.

Only then did I recognise Effie's husband.

Her husband wisely handed me the wine and said nothing.

The next shape appeared through the rain. This one was green.

“Morag,” I said confidently.

It was not Morag.

It was Agnes.

Her hat had originally possessed a large decorative flower on one side. The flower was gone. What remained had collapsed over her left ear and was shedding water down her neck.

“You thought I was Morag.”

“No.”

“You said Morag.”

“I thought you were behind Morag.”

“There is nobody in front of me.”

This was true.

Agnes removed the hat and stared at it.

“My flower’s gone.”

A man appeared at the gate.

“There’s your husband.”

She looked over her shoulder.

“Did you see my flower?”

He stopped.

“What flower?”

Agnes looked at me.

“Thirty-seven years.”

I took her coat.

“Come in.”

Morag arrived next, or at least I assumed it was Morag because I could see her husband approximately twenty feet behind her attempting to lock the car while holding two bottles of wine under one arm.

Her hat was cream. Or had been. By the time it reached my front door it had become another indistinguishable wet animal, this one apparently larger and unhappier than Effie’s. The brim had folded down on both sides and the crown had sunk in the middle.

“Don’t.”

“I haven’t said anything.”

“You’re looking.”

“I have to look at you to let you into the house.”

She stepped inside and saw Effie.

Effie stared at Morag.

Morag stared at Effie.

There was a pause.

“Yours is worse,” Effie said.

“It is not.”

“It absolutely is.”

“At least mine still looks like a hat.”

Margaret came up the path holding her hat onto her head with both hands. She was leaning so far into the wind that, had it stopped suddenly, she would have arrived through my front window.

Her husband followed some distance behind with an umbrella.

“Help me!” Margaret shouted.

“I’m carrying the wine!”

A gust hit Margaret halfway up the path. Her skirt went one way, her hat went another and Margaret remained, through considerable effort, somewhere in the middle.

We got her inside.

Her husband arrived thirty seconds later.

“You could have helped me.”

“I couldn't catch you.”

By now the husbands were accumulating beside Mr Gunn, with wine, damaged umbrellas and the relieved expression of a man who had successfully delivered his wife to somebody else’s house.

Then Jean arrived. She was wearing no hat.

Five women stared at her.

“What?”

“We’re wearing hats,” said Agnes.

“I can see that.”

“You said you were dressing up.”

“I am dressed up.”

“You haven’t got a hat.”

“I looked out the window before I left.”

There are occasions when superiority does not need to be expressed. It simply walks into your house with dry hair.

Jean’s husband came up the path behind her. He was carrying a bottle of whisky and no umbrella.

Mr Gunn opened the door for him.

“You all right?”

“Aye.”

That was the entirety of the male discussion concerning the weather.

The husbands had already discovered the sitting room. Mr Gunn put the television on and, within minutes, they had arranged themselves in the deeply familiar male formation of men who have been told there is an event happening in the next room but have no intention of attending it unless food becomes available.

“What are they watching?” Effie asked.

“Football,” called Mr Gunn.

“There isn’t any football on.”

There was a pause.

“There is now.”

We went through to the dining room. There was a gratifying silence when the ladies saw the table.

“Oh, this is lovely,” said Elspeth.

“Very smart,” said Margaret.

Morag looked at the backgammon board.

“Is that the fashionable one?”

“It’s ours.”

“How much was it?”

“I don’t remember.”

From the sitting room, Mr Gunn said, “£12.99.”

I looked towards the door.

One of the husbands laughed.

That was all it took. Within thirty seconds the men had established that the dining-room door was open far enough for them to hear everything while still maintaining that they were watching television. I decided to ignore them.

We poured the wine. Then we sat down and discovered that nobody could remember how to play backgammon.

“I thought you knew,” I said to Effie.

“Why would I know?”

“You asked how much we were playing for.”

“That doesn’t mean I know the rules.”

Agnes picked up one of the counters.

“What are these called?”

“Counters.”

“I thought they were men.”

“They may be men.”

Jean had taken out her phone.

“They’re called checkers.”

“We’re not playing checkers,” said Margaret.

“No, the pieces are called checkers.”

“That’s unnecessarily confusing.”

I produced the rules on my phone. This introduced us to the concepts of blots, points, bars, bearing off and something called the doubling cube.

Morag picked up the doubling cube.

“What’s this?”

“It doubles.”

“What?”

“The game.”

“How?”

“I haven’t got that far.”

Effie inspected it.

“It has sixty-four on it.”

“We are not playing sixty-four games,” said Elspeth.

“No, I think it doubles the stakes.”

Everyone looked at me.

“There are no stakes.”

Effie sat back.

“Then what are we doing?”

“We are playing backgammon.”

“For nothing?”

“For enjoyment.”

From the sitting room, one of the husbands called, “That won’t last.”

Agnes turned towards the door.

“Nobody asked you.”

“Just saying.”

“Watch your television.”

“We are.”

“Then how do you know what we’re doing?”

“You’re louder than the television.”

This received several male noises of agreement from the next room.

We divided into pairs and began. Or at least I believed we began. Within five minutes, Margaret accused Agnes of moving in the wrong direction, Agnes accused Margaret of inventing rules, and Morag had eaten most of the cheese biscuits.

“You’ve moved that twice,” Margaret said.

“I have not.”

“You were there.”

“I was not there.”

“I saw you.”

“Well, you should have said something before I moved.”

From the sitting room came a male voice.

“She was there.”

Agnes turned around.

“Who said that?”

Nobody answered.

“Which one of you said that?”

The television suddenly became louder.

“Cowards,” said Agnes.

Jean, meanwhile, had become suspiciously competent. She was moving counters with the confidence of a woman who had somehow progressed from not remembering the rules to conducting a military campaign in

less than twenty minutes.

“You’ve played this before,” I said.

“No.”

From the sitting room came her husband’s voice.

“Yes, she has.”

Jean stopped.

“Nobody asked you.”

“Every Sunday at your mother’s.”

“That was years ago.”

“Twenty years.”

Effie sat back.

“I knew it.”

Jean raised her voice.

“Would you like to come in here and play?”

“No.”

“Then be quiet.”

There was a short pause.

Her husband added, “Your mother used to cheat as well.”

Jean stood up.

Mr Gunn increased the television volume.

“Sit down,” I told her.

“I am going to kill him.”

“Not during the first game.”

Jean sat down.

“My mother did not cheat.”

From the sitting room came, “She absolutely did.”

“MR GUNN.”

“Wasn’t me.”

I was beginning to understand that separating husbands and wives by one internal wall does not constitute

separate entertainment.

By nine o'clock the hats were drying, the wine was disappearing and somewhere along the way fifty-pence pieces had appeared on the table. I did not see who introduced them. This is often the way with social decline. One moment six respectable women were enjoying an ancient game of strategy; the next there was £3.50 beside the wine bottle and Effie was demanding change for a tenner.

Mr Gunn called through, "Are you gambling now?"

"No."

"Sounds like gambling."

"It is fifty pence."

One of the husbands said, "That's how it starts."

Effie raised her voice.

"How what starts?"

"Crime."

I went through to the sitting room to replenish the nuts and found four pairs of shoes lined up beneath the coffee table. The men were sitting with drinks in their hands watching what appeared to be a documentary about bridges.

I took the bowl of nuts and returned to the dining room.

By the third game, Effie had become convinced that Jean was deliberately leaving pieces exposed in order to lure people into taking them. Margaret believed this was against the spirit of the evening.

"It's strategy," said Jean.

"It's entrapment," said Margaret.

"It's backgammon."

"It's underhand."

One of the husbands called, "That's what strategy is."

Margaret looked towards the sitting room.

"Do you play backgammon?"

"No."

"Then how would you know?"

"I was in the Army."

Margaret stared towards the sitting room for a moment. I could see her deciding whether twenty-five years of military experience entitled a man to comment on a game he had already admitted he did not play. She decided that it did not.

“You were in the Army twenty-five years ago.”

“Strategy doesn’t expire.”

“Neither does interfering, apparently.”

That ended the military contribution for a while, and we returned to the board. By then, however, the evening had reached the stage where backgammon was still officially the reason we were there but had ceased to be the most interesting thing in the room. Jean was winning, Morag was eating steadily, and the rest of us were dividing our attention between the game, the wine and the condition of the hats drying in the hall.

It was Effie who noticed the smell first.

“Is something burning?”

Everyone stopped.

I smelled the air.

“No.”

Agnes smelled it too.

“There is definitely something.”

We followed the smell into the hall and discovered that Agnes’s hat had slipped sideways against the radiator. It was not on fire, but one side had become distinctly warmer than the other and the damp wool had acquired the odour of something being slowly prepared for supper.

“My hat,” Agnes said.

“It’s fine.”

“It cost £120.”

“That doesn’t make it less hot.”

By then the husbands had heard us and begun appearing from the sitting room, one by one, still carrying their drinks. There is no quicker way to attract men from another room than the possibility that something mechanical, electrical or combustible has gone wrong.

Mr Gunn lifted the hat from the radiator and inspected it.

“It’s all right.”

Agnes looked at him.

“How do you know?”

“It’s not on fire.”

This was technically true, although it was not the standard by which Agnes judged millinery.

While we were all standing in the hall, Margaret suddenly pointed at one of the husbands.

“There’s your flower.”

Agnes turned.

The missing flower from her hat was attached to the back of his jumper.

Nobody spoke for several seconds.

He twisted around, unsuccessfully trying to see it.

“How did that get there?”

Agnes removed it carefully.

That sent us back into the dining room, although by then the men had lost some of their commitment to the television. They lingered near the doorway, looking at the board with the guarded interest of people who had spent the evening insisting they were not interested in something and were now beginning to regret the position.

I brought out sausage rolls.

This changed everything.

Within seconds, the husbands were in the dining room.

Mr Gunn took one.

“I thought you were watching television.”

“We were.”

The sausage rolls were placed beside the backgammon board and, almost immediately, one of the men pointed at the position of the counters.

“You’ve got that wrong.”

Six women looked at him.

He stopped chewing.

“What?”

Jean narrowed her eyes.

“You remember how to play.”

He looked towards the other husbands. This was a mistake, because several of them had already acquired the expression of men who knew exactly what was about to happen.

“A bit.”

I looked at Mr Gunn.

He became very interested in his sausage roll.

“Do you remember how to play?” I asked him.

“Of course.”

I stared at him.

“You have been sitting in the next room all evening while we read the rules on my phone.”

“You didn’t ask.”

This was the moment when I understood that there are two kinds of knowledge in marriage: information freely offered, and information a husband will carry silently to the grave unless a direct question is asked.

Jean’s husband admitted that he knew as well. So did two of the others. Within five minutes, the men who had spent three hours watching television were standing around the table correcting our moves, discussing the doubling cube and helping themselves to the sausage rolls.

At eleven o’clock we began finding coats. The hats required more thought. Effie tried hers on, looked in the hall mirror and immediately took it off again. Agnes held hers at arm’s length. Morag simply refused to wear hers.

“I’m not going back out in that thing.”

Mr Gunn opened the hall cupboard and produced a cap.

“Wear this.”

Morag looked at it.

“I’m wearing a dress.”

“It’ll keep your head dry.”

She considered the cap, then the ruined hat.

She put on the cap.

Fashion has limits.

Eventually everyone made it outside. The rain had eased, but the wind had not. Effie was halfway down the path when a gust caught the remains of her hat and lifted it clean out of her hands.

We all watched it disappear into the darkness.

Effie looked at her husband.

“Well?”

He looked towards the field.

“It was £85,” she said.

He sighed and went after it.

Mr Gunn and I stood in the doorway watching his torch move behind the hedge.

“Do you think he’ll find it?” I asked.

“Hope not.”

I closed the door before Effie could hear him.

Modern Scot - Distinctly Scottish

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