

OLD BALLOCH SCHOOL RENOVATION PROPOSAL : SUPPORTING STATEMENT



This proposal is to restore the main school building to its original condition, with all materials faithfully replaced, and add modest contrasting extension in traditional materials , set back from the old school to respect its value and position as an historic building.

We have worked long and hard with the Cairngorm Park's Planners on the application and although we have now got an agreed design, and they are supportive in principle of the renovation of the building as a local historic building, their hands are tied by the constraints of the current planning legislation which means the application falls between two stools:

It can neither be approved as the renovation of a house as it was never a dwelling, nor as the conversion of a non-residential building as this policy states that it must be 'substantially intact' prior to conversion.

Sadly the Balloch school has had its roof removed in recent years, prior to my client's ownership, and this has led to exposure of stonework and wallheads which are rapidly deteriorating. In fact, having been involved in this project over a number of years, I have noticed the stonework getting progressively worse, mostly due to water getting into the now totally exposed walls and wall-head, then freezing, thus pushing mortar off the walls. It is my honest professional opinion that if something is not done with this building within the next year it may be beyond repair, and then will be lost to the community forever.

However, although the stonework may need rebuilt in parts, this is still possible, and has been looked at in detail by a local stonemason in conjunction with our consultant engineer, who has started :

As we discussed from our inspection and your subsequent discussion with the stone mason we are satisfied the School can be structurally made good ... once the stone mason starts and... finds local areas of the walls where the mortar has degenerated, these areas can be taken down and cleaned back to sound mortar then brought back up as required.

However, with no roof and deteriorating walls the planning department have felt unable, to conclude the building as 'substantially intact'.

Although not a listed building, the old school is an important local landmark with a long social history attached to it – this is a field gaining momentum and interest. and there are many available accounts of the school – two examples are appended to this document.

Researchers and universities and interested locals alike are all working to create and maintain a good database of social history, and that of the school is at the forefront.

[In Scotland, the local school, along with death and the common cold, is just about the one life experience we all share.](#)

When great effort is going into preserving the fragile cultural heritage in so many other ways –story-telling, music etc., surely the physical preservation of the local school, especially one in such a special setting, has to be important to the Cairngorm Park's aims and achievements ?

It is worth noting that the results of the national Park's Upper Donside Questionnaire returned that out of the 22 proposals from local residents of buildings they would wish to see renovated, 3 of those were specifically requesting the Balloch School be restored. Again, it needs to be stressed that the current condition of the building is such that if it is not restored in the very near future the opportunity will be lost.

Our proposal is for a respectful and modest renovation and extension project, to provide a 2-3 bedroom cottage. It is neither grand , out of scale, out of character or inappropriate.

The application's possible refusal seems to be brought on by a set of planning guidelines which , although well-intentioned, simply do not accommodate such an individual situation.

If this planning policy red tape forbids the restoration of the old school then it will , like so many elements of our heritage, disappear forever.

We also append a page of photographs of the old school building to demonstrate., that although it has no roof, it is still very much a substantial building, with a sense of place worthy of retention.

However the difference between condition of the internal wall to the rhs of fireplace between February 2008 and April 2009 are marked – the internal face of that wall has fallen in the intervening 14 months. The external face however is intact, but needs immediate protection from the elements.



2008



2009

EXTRACTS FROM SOLICAL HISTORY DOCUMENTS ON OLD BALLOCH SCHOOL

University of Aberdeen Elphinstone Institute (language traditional + history)

Paper on North East schools

David Northcroft

"Scotland is the best educated country in the world and the North-East counties are the best educated counties in it."

(Sir Henry Craik, Head of Scotch Education Department, 1885-1904).

[In its ever more wide-reaching efforts to serve the history and the culture of the North of Scotland, the Elphinstone Institute pursues a strong interest in the region's schools and the educational system.](#)

The aim here is to explore the contributions that the local school has made to the shaping of our area's distinctive identity and cultural experience. The Scottish people have long prided themselves on the way in which their communities have valued education. They can point to a rich history where, for centuries, their nation led the world in its provision for all its citizens, however poor and lowly of rank. This is a commitment which has established a heritage of personal and social values which, it may be claimed, still has power today. And, with their lore of lads o' pairts, of dominies and the parish skweel, it has been the counties of the North East which have come to be regarded as the heartland of such ideals.

It is a tradition which deserves to be commemorated through research into the places and the characters which have contributed to the region's proud record in education. But it is also important to do this in a spirit of critical investigation, not mere celebration, for behind the official version there has always existed a more complex story, one that is to be encountered in the personal recollections and the local histories of the people of the North East. For some, there has been no doubt that 'opportunity' and 'getting on' have been true enough - but there are others who will point to a schooling that was narrow, over-disciplined, neglectful of the less academically inclined and repressive of their home culture and the tone that went with it.

In my role as Research Associate, I am attempting to engage with these issues in a number of ways:

1. In September 2000, the Institute hosted a conference on 'Local Schools and National Schooling'. I am currently editing a collection of articles which is based on that event. Contributors include Professors Robert Anderson and Ian Campbell of Edinburgh University, Gordon Booth, Derrick McClure, Peter Murphy, the late Robbie Robertson, Dr Douglas Young, and myself. Their topics range from the classroom position of Doric to the future of the local classroom in the computer

- age. There are also articles that deal with R. F. Mackenzie's place as a North-East romantic rebel, with the Keig upbringing of Robertson Smith, the prodigious 19th century scholar who was also arraigned for blasphemy by his church, and the way in which such writers as Lewis Grassie Gibbon, William Alexander, Jessie Kesson and Ian Macpherson have represented their own educational experiences in their literature. It is hoped that the book will come out some time later in 2003.
2. [It is important to treat North-East education as a living experience](#). A series of 90-minute audio-taped interviews are being gathered together as an ongoing project. In them, local folk are being invited to record their own memories and views of what their school has meant to them. To date some 30 oral histories have been captured. They include Norman Harper, James Michie and Robbie Shepherd as well as a trio of vigorous nonagenarians.
 3. In May, Edinburgh University Press will be publishing my book *Scots at School*, which brings together a wide-ranging collection of personal accounts of going to school in Scotland through the ages, complete with historical commentary. Although this work is national in scope, it is the North East which has provided the largest number of contributions. These range from patriotic pieces in the *Aberdeen Magazine* of 1832 to Evelyn Glennie's music (and mental arithmetic) lessons at Cairnrorrie some 150 years later.

[In Scotland, the local school, along with death and the common cold, is just about the one life experience we all share](#). I would be delighted to hear from any friend (or friend of a friend) who might have any views about what I am trying to do. I should be especially grateful for any suggestions as to likely interviewees.



[Photograph supplied by Mrs Campbell of Dingwall, grand-daughter of Miss Singer. Balloch Public School, 1907, Upper Strathdon.](#)

[All 19 pupils of this remote Aberdeenshire School are present for the photographer, along with their one teacher, Miss H. Singer. Depopulation led to its closure after the war; the building has long since become overgrown by foliage.](#)

Aberdeen Town & County History Society

~COUNTRY SKWEELS & CITY SCHOOLS~

David Norcroft

*I reckon that the education I got at my little school was as good as any in Britain . The speaker is Billy Duncan, aged 82 and looking back on the nine sessions – his only ones of formal education – he spent at the now derelict Balloch School , high up in the Glen Nocht hills. The establishment he recalls was a tiny one-roomed, one-teacher school on the road which rises up from Bellabeg to the Glenbuchat Lodge. Billy was the son of the head-keeper on the estate there, a position which he grew up to fill himself. Now living in retirement at Corgarff, he reflects with satisfaction on the long years which have, almost all of them, been passed in his remote upland spot: *To this day I'm not very fond of crowds, I couldn't abide to live in a town.**

For a couple of years Billy Duncan was a foot soldier in the British Army as it pushed its way up through Italy in the latter stages of the Second World War. At Anzio he was taken prisoner; for fifteen months he found himself a POW in Germany . These were experiences which led him to mix in with people from all over the UK and from a range of backgrounds. His ability to do whatever was required of him and the extent to which he was able to hold his own in such company showed him that the education he had received up in the wilds of Strathdon had indeed equipped him with knowledge, skills and basic good sense.

His is a judgement that has been repeated by many of those who, like him, have been interviewed as part of my current attempts to compile an oral history of 'Growing up in the North-east of Scotland ' during the 20 th century. Alan Presly is a generation younger and had his early schooling among the Buchan farmlands. The son of a 'big' farmer, he ended up at Robert Gordon's College in the city but it is to those Primary years at his local school at Craigdam that he turns with real affection: *Craigdam gave me an excellent early education. The small school offered a cohesion you simply couldn't get in a larger place. All the kids of the village mixed together. We did all kinds of things together, not just the three Rs but art, music, knitting, PE.* All this was with the one teacher, the redoubtable Miss Isabella Buchan, tweeds, brogues, wrap-around Paisley pattern overall, hair in a bun: *The*

versatility of those old village schoolmistresses was quite amazing.

It is a compelling image and one that continues to glow in the recollections whenever those of an older generation are asked to summon up their view of the best traditions of North-east education. Then they are liable to evoke, not some sleekly glassed ferro-concrete PPP complex dumped down among the rolling bungalows of suburbia, still less the looming bulk of its urban counterpart, but the more homely arrangement of the little local school, which, planted there among the cottages and up past the village shop, nestles at the very heart of sturdy, old fashioned values and intimate community care.