

THE PINNING STONES

Culture and community in Aberdeenshire

6 *When traditional rubble stone masonry walls were originally constructed it was common practice to use a variety of small stones, called pinnings, to make the larger stones secure in the wall. This gave rubble walls distinctively varied appearances across the country depending upon what local practices and materials were used. 9*

Historic Scotland, *Repointing Rubble*



ALBA | CHRUTHACHAIL



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THE PINNING STONES

Culture and community in Aberdeenshire

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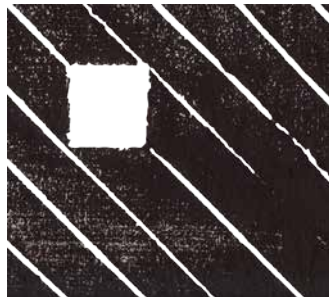
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FORE WORD

From the *Provost of
Aberdeenshire*

Welcome to The Pinning Stones, a unique journey exploring Aberdeenshire's cultural identity.

Aberdeenshire is a hidden gem in the North East of Scotland, with a stunning natural environment, mountains and coastal areas, busy and vibrant towns and villages, outdoor activities, castles and whisky trails. It has an international community – driven by oil and gas, yet still firmly rooted in its traditional industries of fishing, farming and agriculture.

It is a place where artists and innovators come to life, inspired by our natural assets and quality of life.

The area has a unique identity which has been crafted through the generations of people whose stories underpin our traditions, values and beliefs.

I am delighted to introduce The Pinning Stones and look forward with anticipation to the future, where we celebrate our cultural identity and recognise it as the beating heart of Aberdeenshire.

Councillor Jill Webster

Provost of Aberdeenshire

FORE WORD

*From the Chair of
Education, Learning
and Leisure Committee
Aberdeenshire Council*

Aberdeenshire is an area steeped in creativity, with a cultural identity carved through the passage of time by innovators, artists and creatives. It results in a place of cultural depth where every layer reveals something different and unexpected.

The 'Pinning Stones' is a creative mapping exercise by internationally renowned cultural researcher and commentator François Matarasso which, for the first time, reveals the full extent of the unique cultural heritage of Aberdeenshire.

François spent several months travelling across Aberdeenshire speaking to community groups, professional organisations and individual practitioners, undertaking a rich and visual engagement process.

The work was jointly commissioned by Aberdeenshire Council and Creative Scotland who recognise the "sleeping giant" of the cultural infrastructure in Aberdeenshire.

François' work has generated considerable enthusiasm in communities and this will be built on through the Place Partnership with Creative Scotland. This work also fed into the new Cultural Strategy for Aberdeenshire, 'Creative Energy', adopted by Council at a meeting of the Education Learning and Leisure Committee in February 2013.

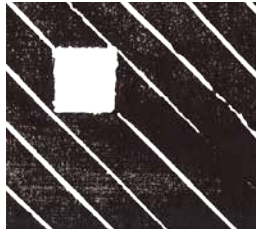
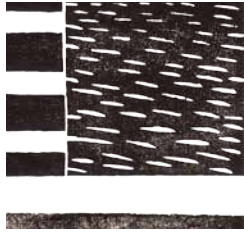
We hope everybody enjoys and recognises Aberdeenshire places and communities in this publication and discovers something new and fascinating about the area's cultural heritage.

Councillor Isobel Davidson

*Chair of Education, Learning and Leisure Committee
Aberdeenshire Council*

PART ONE





1

HIDDEN IN PLAIN VIEW

The Purloined Letter is one of three stories in which Edgar Allen Poe created the template for the cerebral, amateur detective that Sir Arthur Conan Doyle subsequently made famous by drawing on his Edinburgh medical school experience. Poe's detective, Auguste Dupin, is challenged to recover a compromising letter stolen from its owner. The thief is known; the location of the letter (his apartment) is known. Police officers have ransacked the place in the blackmailer's absence, piercing cushions, dismantling furniture, even lifting the wallpaper. Still it cannot be found. With a little mental effort, Dupin discovers the missing letter in a cheap card rack hanging from the mantelpiece, hidden in plain view.

Aberdeenshire, the largest part of North East Scotland, which is itself the largest part of the country, also seems to be hidden in plain view. Jutting its forehead towards Norway, it is cut off by Scotland's own great north road, the A9 passing to the west on its way to Inverness and Thurso. This is the road to the Highlands, known to millions of visitors in search of wilderness Scotland. It is sufficiently part of Scottish culture to have inspired a band, Session A9, and an Ian Rankin novel, in which John Rebus winds his way up and down the road to Caithness. Given the natural, historical and cultural assets of the Scottish Highlands and Islands it is understandable if few of those using the road look east, to where the Cairngorm Mountains shield open lands beyond.

Aberdeen is famous, of course—the Granite City or, more fetchingly, the silver city (with the golden sands). Nowadays it's probably best known as the Oil Capital of Europe, since the discovery in 1970 of the largest petroleum field in the North Sea, just 110 miles from the city. Oil from the Forties field came ashore in September 1975 and has flowed copiously ever since, bringing great prosperity to the city and neighbouring areas and turning the A90 south from Aberdeen into a pipeline of constant traffic.



The A9 and the A90 make a great letter Y on the map of Scotland between whose arms lies the vast, varied and underappreciated country of Aberdeenshire, so big that it is, like the purloined letter, easy to miss.

It is home to almost a quarter of a million people, which, if the Shire were a city, would make it Scotland's third most populous, rather than Aberdeen.² Since it is not, its people are dispersed over 2,437 square miles of fields, moor and mountain, in market towns, villages, ports, estates and farmsteads. But this is not one of the thinly populated parts of Scotland. With just over 101 inhabitants per square mile, compared to the national average of 174, Aberdeenshire is more densely settled than Highland, Argyll and Bute, Dumfries and Galloway, Scottish Borders or even Perth and Kinross.

Its relative invisibility is hard to explain. Aberdeenshire does not lack assets, natural or human. From the Cairngorms National Park, the largest such in the British Isles, to the spectacular coasts of Buchan and Kincardineshire, it holds immense and varied treasures of landscape, flora and fauna. For millennia, its inhabitants have depended on those natural resources: the wheat, oats and barley grown in the better fields, the cattle and sheep fed on pasture and moor; the wood, clay and stone for building; game from the heather and fish from burn and sea; and now, the oil and the gas and the wind.

In making the most of those assets, again over millennia, the peoples of North East Scotland have created unique ways of life expressed in their cultures. The traces are everywhere.

There are obvious ones, like the stone circles, tombs and monuments, vitrified forts and hill towns, symbol stones, kirks, abbeys and chapels, castles, manses and great houses, gardens and parks, Royal Burghs and planned towns, distilleries and warehouses, colleges and academies, village halls, institutes and so much more. There are less

obvious traces too, like the tracks that people have walked for 10,000 years, the unique language of the 'loons an quines', the satire of Bothy Ballads, the place name legacies of long lost people, the airs, the steps, the stories and all the rest.

And there is the rich diversity of today's culture, connecting all that past and its traditions with new ideas from a world of global travel, virtual communication and advanced technology, in which ever more people earn a living as artists and the rest of us spend ever more time and money enjoying what they do, or doing it ourselves, for the love of it.

Little wonder then that Aberdeenshire's quality of life is so prized by those who live there and so admired by those who don't. In 2012, the Bank of Scotland named it the best place to live in its annual quality of life survey, for the fourth time in seven years.³ The assessment is based on relatively straightforward measures including the economy, levels of unemployment, health statistics, life expectancy, crime rates, education outcomes, house prices and so on—though bankers' calculations, it must be said, do not take much account of culture. And, except in that crucial omission, the Bank of Scotland is not wrong. Its evident prosperity must strike anyone coming to North East Scotland from another part of the United Kingdom today.

Of course, in an area as large and diverse as this, there are places and people who do not share in this wealth and wellbeing. But there are fewer of them than in many parts of Scotland: in 2012, only five areas of 301 in Aberdeenshire were among the 15% most deprived in Scotland.⁴ It is true that hardship is often hidden in rural areas because there are not the concentrations that make it statistically visible. It's also true that prosperity can cause problems for some, for example, in the cost of housing. But these challenges should not obscure the fact that Aberdeenshire is in many ways a fortunate

place, rich not only in the obvious sense, but also in landscape, in natural resources, in its heritage and contemporary culture, in its people—in short, rich in quality of life.

Why then this sense of invisibility, of being an unknown and undervalued part of Scotland?

It must be admitted that Aberdeenshire is probably not the first place that springs to mind when Scotland is mentioned. The capital, proud Athens of the North, the Merchant City that renewed itself creatively, the Highlands that seem to represent the auld Scotland, the Isles with their distinct and visible presences—there are so many strong images of Scotland, so many places of outstanding beauty or interest. All of North East Scotland, including Moray, Angus and the City and Shire of Aberdeen, gets just 50 pages out of 670 in the *Rough Guide to Scotland*: Edinburgh, Glasgow and the Highlands and Islands each have a *Rough Guide* to themselves.

Somehow the story of the North East has not been heard. Its folklore and battlefields, its food and buildings, its artistic treasures and natural heritage—all are loved by those to whom they belong, but without the urge to brag about them to the world. Other places have had their children to sing them: Robert Burns in Dumfries; Sorley MacLean in Na h-Eileanan Siar; George Mackay Brown and Edwin Muir in Orkney; even Assynt has Norman MacCaig, though he lived in Edinburgh. There are important writers from Aberdeenshire but, except Lewis Grassie Gibbon, they use a softer tone that carries less far.

Who hasn't heard of Gaelic, with its history and culture? But who outside the North East knows of Doric, equally rich and equally vulnerable to modernity? The Book of Kells and the Lindisfarne Gospels are national treasures; the Book of Deer is unknown except to specialists. The stone circles of Calanais and Brodgar draw tens of thousands

every year: the hundred stone circles in Aberdeenshire, even such easily accessible ones as Easter Aquhorthies by Inverurie, retain their lonely atmosphere.⁵ It is hard to think of a facet of culture celebrated elsewhere that does not have its lesser-known counterpart in Aberdeenshire.

Scale is part of the explanation. Although there are larger Scottish council areas than Aberdeenshire, they all have smaller populations. Aberdeenshire has a wealth of small towns, historic estates, castles and other sites all with strong, local identities. In its present form, Aberdeenshire is a recent creation in Scottish local government. The name is ancient. Aberdeenshire existed before 1305, but was abolished in 1975 to make way for Grampian Regional Council. The old Shire was split between four new District Councils: the City of Aberdeen, Banff & Buchan, Gordon and Kincardine & Deeside. Aberdeenshire Council was created in 1996, when Grampian and the District Councils were abolished in their turn, but the city became, like the new council, a unitary authority.

Do these changes matter to anybody but historians of local government? Undoubtedly: because they have resulted in a complicated sense of identity for many residents and practical challenges for the Council itself. It is not easy for outsiders to understand the character, or even the location, of somewhere that is named after a city in a different place. It is made harder when that character is shaped by ancient names—Banff, Buchan, Gordon, Kincardine—and old allegiances, themselves the result of topography, economics, social ties and other slow-changing factors.

This essay shines a light on some of Aberdeenshire's remarkable cultural assets and so, perhaps, may encourage residents and visitors alike to appreciate more fully the distinctiveness of this part of Scotland. It does so with an outsider's eye that cannot aspire to the insight of someone born and brought up here, like John R. Allan,

whose every page is a literary enactment of North East culture. Reading Allan is like sharing a fireside and a dram with the most companionable and modest expert in all Aberdeenshire. Decades would not suffice to gain comparable knowledge, and this essay has been written in days after a few weeks spent travelling in the Shire, reading about it, seeing some of its treasures and, above all, talking to people involved in or who care about its cultural life.

But sometimes the outsider's perspective is just what's needed when everything has become too familiar and too complicated, when the wood has disappeared behind the trees. So this essay is not about the trees, except insofar as it is necessary to talk about them to understand the wood. It is about culture writ large and broad and the difference it can make to the several hundred communities who collectively make up modern Aberdeenshire. It is a personal impression, but it draws on those conversations with people of many ages and backgrounds, some born here, others settled here, others still just here for a while.

It offers one path through the fascinating and varied landscape of Aberdeenshire's cultural life. Given the time of year in which this work was done, it might fairly be described as a winter walk. There are many others, each with different views of Bennachie, Tap o' Noth or Mormond Hill, some more strenuous, some more companionable. Each has its advocates. If this essay has a purpose, other than to inform and divert, it is simply to point out what is actually in plain view—the riches of Aberdeenshire's culture and its importance to those who live here at a time of exceptional change in North East Scotland.

Like the pinning stones that are so distinctive in the local building tradition, that culture is easily overlooked. But, like them, it plays a vital part in holding everything together.



2

PLACE AND PEOPLE

North

“Everyone carries their own idea of north within them. To say ‘we leave for the north tonight’ brings immediate thoughts of a harder place, a place of death: uplands, adverse weather, remoteness from cities. A voluntary northward journey implies a willingness to encounter the intractable elements of climate, topography and humanity.”

Peter Davidson, *The Idea of North*⁶

We are animals in an ecosystem, though that is not the whole story. But we sometimes behave as if it were not part of the story at all, especially when we are most proud of our achievements, as we often are when we talk about art and culture. But, however transcendent we believe our art to be, we would not seek transcendence if we did not also know ourselves as animals experiencing life physically. It matters where we are born and where we live. Life in the tropics, where each day brings a steady 12 hours of light and 12 of darkness, is not like life nearer the Poles, where summer brings almost endless days and winter equally interminable night.

These basic human experiences matter because they shape how we are able to live and consequently what matters to us. And so, in some ways, a person living in Aberdeenshire today will share experiences with someone who lived here a thousand years ago that neither of them has in common with a person who has never lived where winters are caul, dark and dreich. There is continuity in the physical forces that have shaped culture in this part of the world. Those winters mean that the people who live here have always been inclined to gather in the long nights to tell stories, make music and dance a little, perhaps with a warming glass to sip. They were doing it 3,000 years ago in wooden halls and they do it today in community centres, pubs and one another’s homes.



Apple & Cinnamon Cake
Dark Cherry Tartlets
Cinnamon Whirls
Choco Chunk Shortbread
Gooey Choccy Brownies
Shicky Ginger Loaf
Toffee & Maltzasser Cake
Date & Ginger Scones

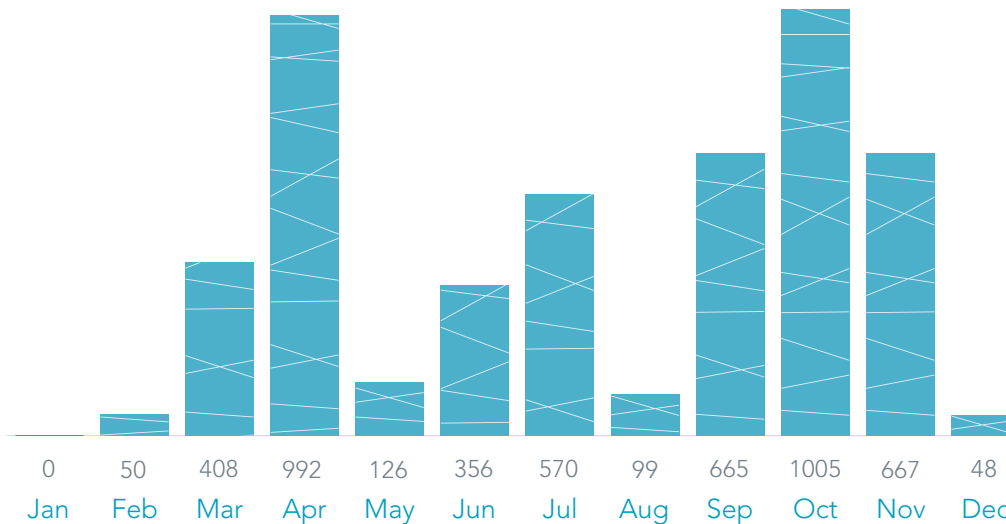
Or what about a
cup of Mulled Cider
to warm you up?
Served with our
Cinnamon Whirls

In southern Europe, people stroll in the streets after dinner, relishing the evening balm after heat, socialising as they walk. In Scotland, they come together around light and warmth and entertain one another.

“*James Skinner, born in 1843, served his own apprenticeship under a well-known fiddler, Peter Milne; playing the cello in a three-men band which performed Strathspeys and reels at the rather strenuous sixpenny dances which regularly took place in barns and bothies throughout lower Deeside.*”

John Hargreaves, *Ten Years of Woodend Arts Association*⁷

This influence of place is obvious, yet easily forgotten, and it does make a real difference to Aberdeenshire’s cultural life. For example, it means that there is a distinct seasonal pattern to activities. Concerts, ceilidhs, plays and dances tend to happen between October and early December and mid January to Easter. Christmas and New Year are mostly spent with friends and family, so there’s less call for organised entertainment, other than seasonal rituals like Stonehaven’s Fireballs. By the spring and early summer, lengthening days bring people out of doors, gardening, walking and playing sports. It’s the time of Highland Gatherings and agricultural shows, festivals and fairs. Similar patterns can be observed in other parts of Scotland, but their importance is accentuated in rural areas with relatively few inhabitants.



Seasonal variation in audiences for NEAT village hall shows⁸

Hills and valleys

“Human settlement and activity are no more than a form of lichen which can take hold in the less exposed crevices and surfaces of the land.”

Neal Ascherson, *Stone Voices*⁹

Central heating helps us live with the effects of geography and climate, but does not make them go away. Cars, trains and buses help us get about, but the land remains the same. We drive, ride and walk along paths made thousands of years ago, largely because they were the easiest and safest way to get from one place to another. And so the roads

of Aberdeenshire still follow the valleys they always have followed, mostly running east towards the sea. It's no accident that the rivers have given their names to whole districts, like Deeside and Donside, because their valleys make natural communities. Hills and mountains separate people so that a journey from Ballater to Banchory feels easier than one from Ballater to Alford though the distance is about the same.

At night, in winter, when those halls echo with Scottish country dancing and orchestra rehearsals, the idea of travelling over the hills for entertainment is not very attractive; so each town, each village, organises its own cultural activities and depends mainly on local people to come. That partly explains the impression that the cultural ecology of Aberdeenshire is rather disconnected: people know what they are involved in, but may know nothing of what happens 10 miles away.

Sea

“It is a strenuous life and interrupted all too frequently by stormy weather—and long spells of stormy weather mean poverty. A brave race of men with quiet, undemonstrative ways, inured to the hardships of life, and tempered to a fine self-reliance by the ever-lurking danger in the restless sea.”

Neil M. Gunn, *White Fishing on the Caithness Coast*¹⁰

In other respects, Aberdeenshire people are anything but parochial. The sea has always been a part of life, even for those who live inland, because for most of human history it has been easier to make long journeys on water than on land. In the 1840s, Aberdeenshire beef reached London tables by sea at the rate of 15,000 animals a year,



a trade that actually declined with the opening of the Aberdeen Railway's land route.¹¹ For centuries, the port of Aberdeen and the smaller harbours dotted along the coast have connected North East Scotland with Scandinavia, the Baltic, Northern Europe and places more distant. So it has been natural for Scots to go abroad and foreigners to come here. I met one person whose father, a fisherman turned shipping chandler, speaks seven languages, including Russian, as a straightforward necessity of business.

Peterhead has been the largest European fishing port since the 1970s, landing 133,000 tonnes of fish with a value of £165 million in 2011. The sea and its uses create its own cultures. Fishing communities are different to farming communities, though field and beach lie side by side in Aberdeenshire. The everyday danger faced by trawler men unites those who live it. The story of the wives who carried their husbands out to the boats to keep their clothes dry as they set sail is still retold with pride. Today's fishermen have the protection of advanced technology and their trawlers dwarf the vessels that used to land the silver darlings, but the risks remain with the rewards and both continue to shape life in the coastal parts of Aberdeenshire.

In better weather, the sea is also a place of pleasure, for swimming and boating, so, until Mediterranean holidays came within reach, the Aberdeenshire seaside was a lively place in summer. Today, the culture of the sea inspires artists and events like the Coast Festival, that takes place in Banff and Macduff, and the Scottish Traditional Boat Festival that draws 15,000 visitors to Portsoy. In 2013, the Boat Festival celebrated 20 years of success with its unique combination of sailing and rowing events, craft stalls and demonstrations, performances and food. For the 2005 festival, a project was established to get young people building Optimist dinghies. So successful was it that it has been followed by the Faering Project, named after a type of boat long associated with the Banffshire coast, and there are plans to make building and sailing boats central to growing up in Portsoy once again.

Leaving and coming home

‘ *So I’ll pack my kist, an’ book my flight an’ fly across the main
Back to dear aul’ Buchan an’ my ain folk aince again* ’

Margaret A. Lorrimer, *Home Thoughts*¹²

Although Aberdeenshire has some of the best arable land in Scotland, in the Mearns, for example, and in Buchan, it also has its thin fields, moors and bogs. Farming in northern climes is not easy and sustaining life has always been tough here. Until quite recently, most people in North East Scotland worked relentlessly, sometimes struggling to make ends meet, from earth or sea, or by providing services to communities without much surplus cash.

So they have often been obliged or chosen to look for work elsewhere and, thanks to the sea, opportunities have not been lacking. Leaving and returning, working away for months and coming home between contracts: these patterns are woven into the social life of Aberdeenshire like the colours in its tweed. Today, thousands of Aberdeenshire men (mostly) work in the oil industry, in the North Sea, of course, but also in Arabia, West Africa or the Gulf of Mexico.

Many families live this pattern of being together and being apart, as their ancestors did too, with the herring or droving. Planes and helicopters move people faster, but the pattern is historic, like the ancient travels of Atlantic salmon. One consequence is to make those times of homecoming, like Christmas and New Year, particularly important. Keeping company with family and friends, revisiting familiar places, marking the old rituals—all are central to the North East’s midwinter. One potter mentioned that this

was the best time of year for sales, after the North East Open Studios in September. It is the season of gifts, of course, but he also said that people living away often come specially to buy something to take back with them—a piece of home for everyday use.

A useful culture

6 *These crofts and farms and gamekeepers' cottages breed men of character. They are individualists, gritty, tough, thrrawn, intelligent, full of prejudice, with strange kinks and a salted sense of humour. Life here is hard and astringent, but it seldom kills grace in the soul. 9*

Nan Sheppard, *The Living Mountain*¹³

Lacking the surplus wealth of lairds and nobles, Aberdeenshire's working folk have tended to channel their creativity into an immaterial culture: the dances, airs, stories and ballads that cost nothing to produce. In the years before the First World War, a schoolmaster from Whitehill and a minister from Lynturk set about collecting local songs. By the time the Greig-Duncan Collection came to be published, between 1981 and 2002, it ran to more than 3,000 pieces in eight volumes—one of the largest and finest such gatherings in the world.¹⁴ Characteristically, the songs serve aesthetic, cultural and social needs at the same time: melody, words and meanings intertwined. Some were designed to accompany and ease manual labour, others to be shared in the enforced rest of long nights. They hold the stories of a folk, pass on morality tales, offer drama, romance and pathos—everything that makes a culture.

Objects in everyday use—pottery, fabric, furniture and so on—also drew people's creative instincts, as they continue to do. In William Blackhall's tailor's shop, at Tarland,



there is a board with samples of the unique tweeds created for the estates of Deeside: Balogie, Birse and Dinnet, Tillypronie, Finzean and Invercauld. They range from chocolate brown to orange, moss and sea green, the variations apparently originating in the local plants used to dye the wool. That may be so, but they also speak of an equally natural human delight in inventiveness and beauty.¹⁵

A poor people's culture is never wasteful and rarely showy: use and ornament are inseparable. The truly gifted performers are honoured but everyone should be able to contribute to the evening's entertainment with a song, a tale or a tune. Above all, perhaps, it is a culture where what someone can do counts for more than what they possess, at least among social equals.

Community

“ We were out of the world, yet we were not lonely. We had some neighbours who were very kind to us; and though there were only half a dozen families, they were a real community. I would not say that people liked each other more than they do in villages or towns; but, when we were so few, we had to be tolerant for the sake of company. We made the most of each other. ”

John R. Allan, *North East Lowlands of Scotland*¹⁶

Land, sea, climate, weather, distance—all these physical factors combine with basic human needs and some deeply-held cultural values to make community both an ideal and a lived reality across much of Aberdeenshire. Where there are few people and others are far away (or at least on the far side of a dark hill) people have little choice but

to make the most of one another, as John Allan says. Mutual assistance, in everything from childcare to putting on a ceilidh, is an everyday necessity. The commitment people bring to building and maintaining community is illustrated by one example, from many places that might equally be chosen.

Mel Shand is an artist living with her family in Finzean, a village of about 300 people in the foothills of the Cairngorms. Inspired by her affection for the place and its people and some old photographs of its former residents, she undertook a documentary photography project called a *Portrait of Our Time*. In September 2009, an exhibition of 252 photographs of local households was presented in the Birse and Feughside church, with an accompanying book. The project lives up to its title. It is a fascinating portrait of one small part in Scotland today, a creative case study of continuity, change and diversity.

But it is also just another link in a chain of artistic and cultural activities through which the community in and around Finzean defines itself and evolves. 2010 saw the premiere of *The Turning of A Year*, a film by Frieda Morrison that documents local life and includes ‘Homecoming Scotland 2009’, celebration of Finzean’s 400 years, the Farmers’ Ball, the Harvest Thanksgiving, construction of the graveyard and the launch of Mel’s book. The portrait itself led on to a community play in the village hall, which is also a venue for North East Arts Touring (NEAT), the arts service that helps local people promote professional theatre and dance in rural areas. The hall also hosts film nights, and is an outreach venue for Woodend Barn in Banchory, which some feel is too far and too arty for them. The Deeside Camera Club has exhibited as part of NEOS in the parish church, while Mel and another local artist have also shown their work.

On the day of my visit, the tables in Finzean Village Hall were set for a Burns Supper with almost 170 covers to be held the following night. One Aberdeen-based musician

observed during our conversation that *'If you go up country everybody'll come out for the little gigs: it's a nice social gathering'*; he might have been speaking of Finzean.

Finzean is a lively community with a rich and diverse cultural life. But it is far from unique or even exceptional in Aberdeenshire. Its hall is one of 28 NEAT venues across the Shire that between them promoted 90 performances in 2012, attended by almost five thousand people. That year, more than 300 artists took part in North East Open Studios, alongside many community groups. What goes on in a village or town may not be immediately obvious—and there is often concern about how people find out what does go on in the Shire—but the links between culture and community are everywhere, if you trouble to look.

Room to breathe

‘The two qualities you admire above all others in works of creative endeavour are space and silence.’

Bill Duncan, The Wee Book of Calvin¹⁷

The sea, like the mountains and the gentler lands between them, form a vast, open world with a distinctive sense of scale. In contrast to the Highlands with their deep valleys and close heights, even the mountains here seem to need room to breathe. There are a lot of people living in Aberdeenshire today, perhaps twice as many as there were before the Second World War (though boundary changes make a precise reckoning difficult) but there is so much land that you don't easily see them. Except close to Aberdeen itself, nowhere in the Shire has more than 20,000 inhabitants, and only five



towns (Peterhead, Fraserburgh, Inverurie, Westhill and Stonehaven) have more than 10,000. Everyone else lives in 52 other settlements or in smaller hamlets, townships and farms.

The overriding impression Aberdeenshire makes is of space. No other aspect of life here was mentioned so often by the artists I met—and not only by them, but also by many who have chosen to make their homes in the North East. People spoke about how it made them feel alive and energised, and gave them room to think. The quality of landscape, sky and sea is a source of inspiration for many artists exhibiting in the North East Open Studios (NEOS), as these extracts from the brochure attest:

☪ *My inspiration comes from the beautiful landscapes of Deeside and the seascapes and vast skies of the west coast — Beaches and landscapes are my favourite subject matter. Ever changing seas and skies excite me — The particular quality of light in the North East permeates my work in seascapes, landscapes and paintings of the indigenous architecture of the coastal villages — I paint semi-abstract landscapes, mainly in acrylic, taking inspiration from the Howe of Cromar, where I live, and the distant hills — Infrared landscapes which capture the local area in a new perspective are contrasted with award winning environmental portraiture of local subjects from across the North East. ☪*

*North East Open Studios Catalogue 2012*¹⁸

But the space artists get by working in the North East is also a professional distance from their peers, from the hothouse of the Central Belt's art or literary scenes, where everybody seems to know everybody. As one writer said: '*Up here you've got space where you don't have to follow the crowd.*'

Working in Aberdeenshire affords people time to think and evolve their practice with more independence. Those who moved here in the 1980s or early 1990s also speak about

how the Internet and mobile phones have brought the world much closer in recent years. The disadvantages of remoteness—such as problems with obtaining materials—have reduced, but some people limit their Internet use to protect its advantages.

There are drawbacks to working far from one's peers. Some artists believe critics undervalue their work because of where they live, as if it were necessary to be in the city to be serious or successful. There is also the difficulty of getting critical feedback, so meeting visitors during NEOS is an important source of contact with audiences, as well as sales. Those artists who also exhibit or perform in other parts of Scotland or abroad often feel more connected as a result. Being the only artist in a community means finding a place alongside everyone else and helping neighbours and friends understand what one does. For one artist, it's about *'knowing where to put your feet: there's much to be said for knowing people and being known.'*

It does not appeal to every artist or maker, as living in remote rural places does not appeal to every butcher, baker or oil executive. But those who stay in or come to Aberdeenshire live with a land, a culture and space to work that give their creativity a distinctive flavour.

A North East way

Is there a North East character, shaping a distinctive culture? Many people think so, including some of the writers who were born there. It is rash to generalise too freely about the character of a place or a people but, with that caution, it might be useful to summarise some qualities that seem relevant to local culture and how it has developed.

Most of what comes to mind will be familiar, especially to those who live in the North East. On the credit side stand self-reliance and independence, a readiness for hard work and a commitment to education, hospitality and a stoic courage—the qualities touched on by Nan Shepherd, above. On the other hand, here is another North Easterner’s view:

‘*Such was the North-East Scottish childhood. Guilt. Sin. Misery. Fear. Self-loathing. Or as my Grandfather Peden used to say: ‘Aye, laddie. It’s a hard life in a Hie’land tripe shop, mak nae mistake,’ glowering out at the dark of a December afternoon, pulling his chair closer to the fire before rearranging the live coals with his bare hands.*’

Bill Duncan, *The Wee Book of Calvin*¹⁹

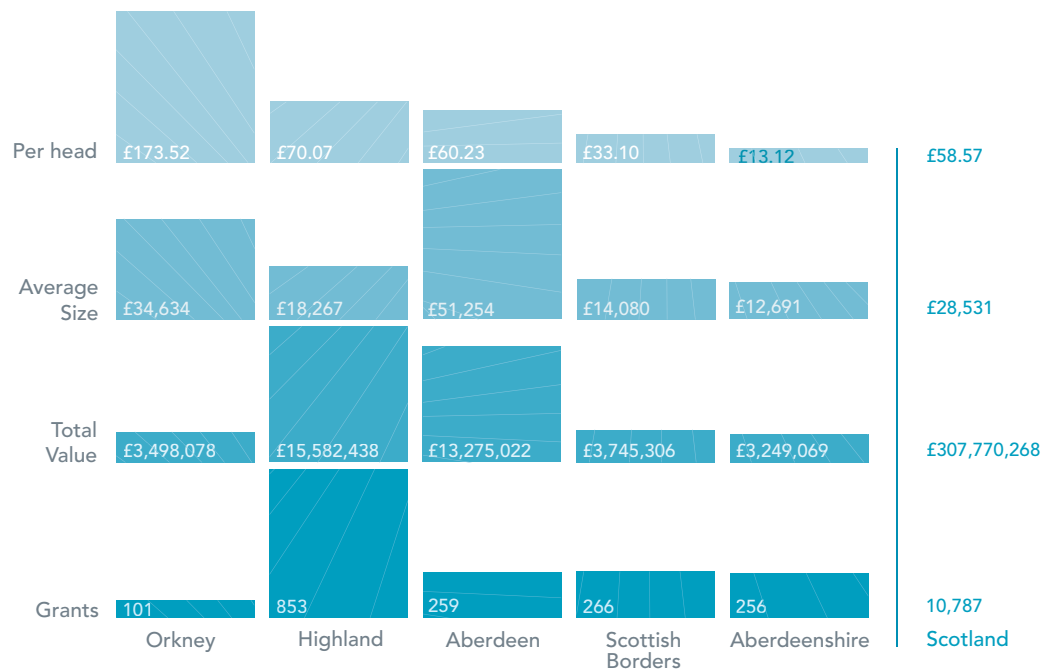
It’s hard to read that without a smile, and a wry, knowing and self-deprecating humour may be another part of the heritage.

Speaking for myself, I observe a certain diffidence among many of those I have met. One reason why the region’s cultural treasures seem so inexplicably unknown may be that locals don’t shout about them very loudly. In speaking to people involved in cultural activities, it was common to hear complaints about lack of promotion or marketing from national agencies. I found myself wondering if that might be because people in the North East feel more comfortable with the idea of someone else blowing their trumpet for them? Perhaps that’s my task here.

And yet, I also heard pride in what is done locally. The phrase ‘*It’s not much, but it’s our own*’ (which I won’t attempt to put into Scots and still less Doric) was used to illustrate a feeling that what matters most about culture is a sense of connection with it, of shared ownership. There is often, under the diffidence, deep pride in the North East’s

character and assets—its landscape, history, monuments, music, language, stories and quality of life.

Together, they make an odd combination, simultaneously confident and unsure, that perhaps accounts for some of the ways in which Aberdeenshire is different from other parts of Scotland. Early in my research, I looked at National Lottery grants made in Scotland since 1995, and was struck by how little Aberdeenshire has received compared with other areas.



National Lottery Arts Grants in Scotland, 1995 - 2011

Across Scotland, the average arts grant through National Lottery, per head of population, has been £58.87. The City of Aberdeen has slightly exceeded that average, but Aberdeenshire has received just £13.12 for each resident. Curiously, City and Shire have had a very similar number of grants: it's just that, on average, those in the city were worth more than four times as much.

There are technical explanations for some of this. For example, rural areas can benefit more than they appear to, if organisations delivering services there are based in cities: since even Aberdeenshire Council has an Aberdeen city postcode, any lottery grants secured by the Council might be incorrectly recorded under the system used. However, even taking this into account, comparison with the Highland and the Borders Council areas, where similar anomalies might be expected, suggest that Aberdeenshire has secured much less arts lottery resource than might be expected. This is borne out by the similar pattern in heritage lottery grants. Although the Shire has a wealth of historic sites and buildings, it has received about half as much heritage lottery funding (£77.09 per head) as Highland (£142) or Scottish Borders (£147.76).

People suggested various explanations for this during our conversations, including limited match funding and the difficulty of meeting the Lottery's funding criteria, though neither is uniquely local. More convincing, perhaps, were those who suggested that Aberdeenshire folk do not always feel entitled to ask for support, believing that communities should be self-reliant, and that they have a stronger than usual distaste for the type of reporting requirements that come with public funding. Quite possibly the anomaly can be accounted for by a combination of all these.

There is another possible explanation. Aberdeenshire, as a whole, is one of the most prosperous parts of Scotland—indeed of the European Union. With its historic strengths in agriculture, forestry and fishing and more recent success in energy,

Aberdeenshire does not face the same economic challenges as many other places. For example, unemployment (as measured by the number of people claiming benefits) was 1.3% in mid-2012, compared to a figure of 4.2% for Scotland as a whole. In 2009, the City and the Shire together had 9% of the country's population but 11% of its jobs. In 2006, it generated 12% of Scotland's GVA, a proportion that is likely to have grown since the recession as other areas have struggled more.

In this context, perhaps cultural development and tourism have been lesser priorities in local planning than in areas with more fragile and less diversified economies. It is notable that Aberdeenshire Council publishes economic data on the energy industry, fishing, rural facilities, agriculture, forestry, the labour market and deprivation but not on tourism or the creative industries.²⁰ Perhaps art, culture and creativity have simply not been as urgent an issue for policymakers in a prosperous North East as they have become elsewhere. Certainly, it would be understandable if their attention has been taken up in recent years with the major development opportunities and challenges of other parts of the regional economy.

But what of the future? Aberdeenshire people, who have seen such profound changes in their way of life since the 1970s, know that more will come as oil and gas reserves diminish. Perhaps there will then be a greater interest in the cultural and creative industries, both in the economy and in strengthening communities. There are rich tangible and intangible heritage resources and a growing number of gifted artists, makers and creative professionals. There are two outstanding universities already supporting creativity, research and innovation and very active in the promotion of music, literature, visual art and traditional culture. There is a unique, little known and underappreciated part of Scotland waiting to be promoted. Confidence and ambition are needed to help these rich assets flourish in the best place to live in Scotland.



3

A CULTURAL MOSAIC

6 *For variety of interests, it is an area possibly unequalled in Scotland. Strathspey, lovely Deeside, grand mountains of the Cairngorms and a long and rugged coastline in which are set numerous little fishing villages. Historic buildings are on every hand.* 9

Ward Lock's *Aberdeen, Deeside, Donside and Eastern Scotland, 1920s*²¹

The sheer size of the North East, which means that most locals think little of an hour's car journey, goes some way to explaining the invisibility of its extraordinary cultural heritage. In Scotland's cities, one can walk between gallery, museum and historic site along streets that are themselves human artefacts, created and recreated over hundreds of years. In Aberdeenshire, one can also go from castle to museum to gallery, but not without transport, while the roads themselves cross a landscape so huge that it is easy to forget that it too is an artefact, the creation of more than 5,000 years of human husbandry.

Edinburgh, Glasgow, even Aberdeen might be compared to coral reefs, encrusted with wonders that cluster together. Aberdeenshire is an ocean, studded with island jewels, each distinct in itself and made the more so by its isolation. Travelling between them takes time and effort but is also part of what being here so rewarding.

A physical heritage

North East Scotland shows traces of human occupation going back to the Stone Age, many of them well preserved thanks to limited urbanisation. On Aberdeenshire Council's website you can explore an amazing map of protected sites and monuments: the whole Shire is covered with so many little blue dots that, except in the more thinly populated mountain areas, it is almost impossible to see the underlying map at all. There are apparently 19,398 of these dots, each one marking a site of archaeological interest that might be as old of the fourth millennium BCE or as recent as the Second World War.

If you follow the Tarland Trail for twenty-odd miles from Echt to Dinnet, along the line of hills that separates the Don from the Dee, you will enjoy some wonderful views, including of the Hill of Fare and Morven. You will also pass a war memorial (1804), the ruins of St Aiden's Church (1677), Cunningar Motte (12th century), Christ Church (1787) and Midmar Stone Circle (2000 BCE), Tom Tough's Well (who knows?), the Peel Ring of Lumphanan (13th century), Craigievar Castle (1626), Corse Castle ruins (1581), Culsh Earth House (1st century), Tomnaverie Stone Circle (3000-2000 BCE) and Culblean Battlefield (1335). Although many of the 19,398 recorded sites are below ground and invisible to the untrained eye, enough are visible, and even visitable, to keep a body busy for years.

Prehistory

Among them are an exceptional number of prehistoric hill forts and settlements, standing stones, burial cairns, barrows, henges, stone circles and landscapes. They



include at least 99 recumbent stone circles, each one between 18 and 24 metres across and distinguished by a massive slab lying between two uprights in the southern or south western quadrant. They are found nowhere else in Europe, and it is thought they are associated with the rising or setting of the major standstill moon that occurs every 18.6 years. These ancient sites lie on lonely hillsides where one can imagine (however wrongly) that nothing has changed since they were made, but also in fields where great combines pass them at harvest time and even within a short walk of busy high streets.

They may have been built by distant people and for purposes that can only now be guessed at, but they attract many today who find their own meanings in them. Some artists have even come to live in Aberdeenshire because of them, while others find them a source of creative inspiration. In 2004, Jason Schroeder persuaded a farmer to allow him to build Breemie Stone Circle at Broomhill, which became the site of a midsummer festival in 2005.²² Whether it is spiritual, archaeological, aesthetic or something else, the interest of these sites remains a powerful and distinctive aspect of Aberdeenshire's cultural heritage.

Silent Picts

“A man stands between two fish-monsters with his arms outstretched, perhaps wielding a sword in his right hand. The monsters are derived from creatures carved on Roman altars; the scene may be of Jonah and the whale.”

The Maiden Stone, c. 800, at Chapel of Garioch²³

That heritage flows in a rich, unbroken stream to the present, with traces of Roman occupation, the unique legacy of the Picts and the very visible remains of the region's Medieval and Early Modern prosperity. Pictish remains are a particularly important

part of that mosaic of occupation, since the peoples who lived here in the first millennium CE created a rich and distinctive culture. Their art, which is readily seen in the symbol stones at Brodie, Glamis, Tyrie and elsewhere in the Shire, is part of the Celtic development of the 'La Tène style', marked by sinuous interlacing, animals and geometric patterns, with later work incorporating Christian symbolism.

The absence of written material from Pictish culture has tended to obscure this important part of Scottish and European history, so that it is less well known than the Anglo-Saxon society developing at the same time further south. With no *Beowulf*, *Seafarer*, *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* or riddles, or even any texts in Latin, the silent Picts tell us about themselves only through their visual culture.

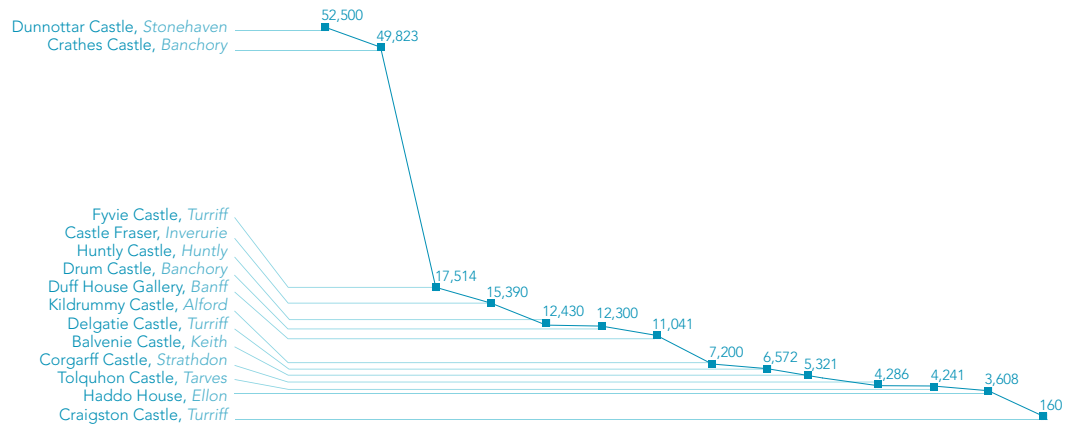
The Middle Ages

Aberdeenshire's early cultures may also be overshadowed by the impressive and very visible heritage of the last thousand years. Cathedrals, castles, burghs and other settlements flourished in a part of the emerging Scottish kingdom that was becoming more prosperous and was usually more sheltered from wars with England than the Borders or even central Scotland.

Aberdeenshire has been at the heart of political, social, economic and cultural developments in the nation since the early Middle Ages. Independent-minded, its people were early supporters of Robert the Bruce, notably in the decisive Battle of Inverurie (or Barra or Oldmeldrum) in 1308, and were rewarded with several charters and letters patent by the king.²⁴ The Shire's large number of castles and fortresses is evidence both of its prosperity, its political importance and, perhaps, the fractious rivalries of its leading families. The creation of Scotland's third university at Aberdeen

in 1495—at a time when England, with five or six times as many inhabitants, still had just Oxford and Cambridge—is evidence of both prosperity and the importance attached to education in the North East.

Scotland’s Castle Trail connects mediaeval ruins at Kildrummy, Tolquhon and Huntly, renaissance fortresses at Crathes, Braemar and Fyvie and Georgian palaces at Haddo and Duff House. These, among other historic sites, have endowed Aberdeenshire with one of the most important collection of castles and fortresses in the British Isles. Yet, these impressive sites attract surprisingly few visitors. Only Dunnottar and Crathes draw more than 20,000 a year, as the following table shows.



Aberdeenshire Castles, paid admissions in 2009²⁵

In fact only five castles in the whole of Scotland received more than 100,000 visitors in 2009—Edinburgh, Stirling, Eilean Donan, Urquhart and Culzean—so it is not that Aberdeenshire underachieves particularly in this respect. Indeed, of the five Scottish sites visited by between 50,000 and 10,000 people, two, Balmoral and Dunnottar, are in Aberdeenshire. However, the distribution of visitors is extraordinarily uneven. Seven out of ten people who paid to visit a Scottish castle in 2009 went to Edinburgh, Stirling, Eilean Donan, Urquhart or Culzean: everyone else went to the other 49 castles included in the survey.

Top 5 Castles	<i>2,351,823 paid admissions</i>
Remaining 49 castles	<i>998,345 paid admissions</i>

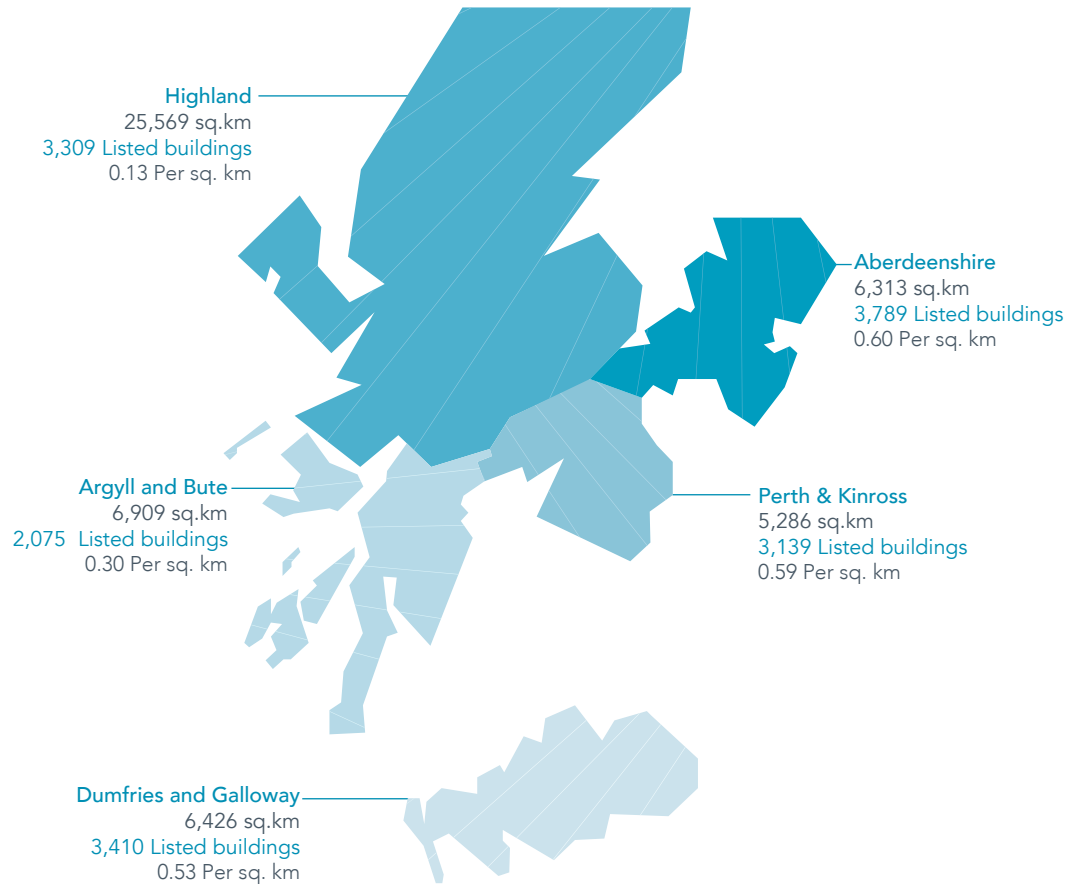
Scottish Castles, paid admissions in 2009²⁶

Of the top five, only Edinburgh and Stirling could be considered central and Edinburgh Castle alone attracts 1.2 million visitors, most of whom are presumably seeing the capital. But how to explain the 314,636 visits to Eilean Donan and the 282,203 to Urquhart Castle? It is true that both are dramatic and much-photographed sites, but so is Dunnottar. The great advantage they have over their Aberdeenshire sister, of course, is being on the main roads through the Great Glen or towards Skye and the North West coast, roads along which wind the majority of tourists and coach parties.

The built environment

Beyond the castles and great houses is the rich fabric of Aberdeenshire's built environment, the Royal Burghs and market towns, villages and farms, public buildings, settlements and monuments. Historic Scotland has currently listed 3,789 buildings in

Aberdeenshire, including 209 in Category A (buildings of national or international importance), and 1,635 in Category B (buildings of regional or more than local importance). This is a relatively high number for a rural area, as the following table suggests.



Listed buildings in the five largest Scottish Councils, by area²⁷

Allowing for the vagaries of the listing process, the marked contrast between Aberdeenshire and Highland or Argyll & Bute may be another indicator of the relative prosperity of the first. These buildings are often cornerstones of town- and landscape, like the former granary and warehouse built by John Adam in 1765 on Portsoy Harbour that is now home to Portsoy Marble and the Pottery. In some places, the number of listed buildings is so large as to define the visual environment. Monymusk, for example, has 29 such, including the House of Monymusk, the Manse, a former church, many of the houses on the square and even a milestone dated 1754, and referring to a regiment of Young Buffs quartered there after Culloden.

These buildings, alongside its exceptional landscape and open skies, contribute much to the visual quality of everyday life in the Shire. The streets of Huntly, Banff or Stonehaven offer visual pleasures at every turn that, whether or not they are consciously noticed, are part of what makes being in Aberdeenshire different to being anywhere else. There are subtle variations in building materials: Banff's golden brown masonry becomes russet at Turriff and silver grey at Inverurie. Everywhere, people have used local stone, timber, harling and tile to give distinction to their structures. Spared wartime bombing and with less insensitive post-war development, Aberdeenshire's towns have kept more character than most. That visual distinctiveness helps make crossing the Deveron estuary from Banff to Macduff such a memorable experience.

Museums

Like most rural areas, Aberdeenshire is not as well endowed with portable treasures as it is with those that cannot be removed or are intangible. Many of its greatest treasures, like the Book of Deer, the Towie Ball, the Tarves Hoard or the Deskford Carnyx, have been carried off to museums far from the North East. Those that remain often do

so because they are in private ownership, like the paintings, furniture and tableware in some of the Shire's stately homes. They are important but, associated as they are with aristocracy and a particular period in Aberdeenshire's past, they do not interest everyone. Some other treasures, no longer present here, might have more resonance in contemporary culture.

The Carnyx, a trumpet made between 50 and 200 CE, was excavated in 1816 in the Banffshire village of Deskford. It is, in the words of the National Museum of Scotland (where it now resides on loan from Aberdeenshire Museums), 'a masterpiece of early Celtic art, shaped to resemble a wild boar with its upturned snout and decoration mirroring the folds of skin around a boar's face'.²⁸ While the arguments for conserving and displaying the great treasures found across Scotland in a National Museum are compelling, they have the drawback of detaching them from the places where they were made and used. And yet they are not dead. The inspirational possibilities of such an object are demonstrated by the work of Carnyx & Co, a company established in 1997 by composer John Kenny around a reconstructed, playable copy of the original and which has since become a focus for innovative music projects.²⁹ Among these is Carnyx Brass, first performed at the BBC Proms in the Park on Glasgow Green in 2007, with a new Kenny commission, *Balvenie Castle*.

In the absence of such iconic items, Aberdeenshire's museums and historic houses have concentrated on local and social history. There are exceptions, however, and several are of regional, even national importance, most obvious among them Duff House in Banff. The building, designed by William Adam, is one of the finest houses of the early 18th century and, like Fyvie Castle, with which it shares the status of being an accredited museum, it is as important for itself as for its contents. Duff House is managed in partnership by Historic Scotland, Aberdeenshire Council and the National Galleries of Scotland, which provide the larger part of its paintings and temporary exhibitions

There are other accredited museums in Aberdeenshire, including the Museum of Scottish Lighthouses in Fraserburgh, the Grampian Transport Museum in Alford and the Inch Connection. The collections of the Aberdeenshire Farming Museum and the Lighthouse Museum are also recognised as nationally significant by Museums and Galleries Scotland.

The cornerstone of the Council's own museums service is Aden Country Park, near Mintlaw, and includes Aberdeenshire Farming Museum, Hareshowe Working Farm, the North East Folklore Archive (NEFA), and ARC Recording Studio, all set in 230 acres of park, woods and farmland. Given the importance of farming to the North East, and of the food it produces to Scotland as a whole, it is right that Aberdeenshire should have such a facility, though farming museums exist elsewhere in Scotland. What makes Aden different is the connection with local culture through the Folklore Archive and links with voluntary groups like Buchan Heritage Society, whose members work with school groups at the museum to introduce them to Buchan's cultural traditions through the medium of Doric.

Until 2012, the Council owned and managed 12 other sites, including local museums in Banchory, Banff, Huntly, Peterhead and Stonehaven and heritage sites at Fordyce, Garlogie, Maud and Sandhaven. Several attracted low numbers: in 2009, the Brander Museum in Huntly had 1,098 visitors and Banff Museum just 771. Consequently, the Council decided to consolidate its resources on four main sites: Aden, Mintlaw Discovery Centre, Banchory Museum and the Arbuthnott collection in Peterhead. Where possible, other sites, like the Tolbooth Museum in Stonehaven, have been handed over to community volunteers.

Like the involvement of local people in the Farming Museum at Mintlaw, this voluntary input is characteristic of other Aberdeenshire museums, as it is of cultural life here

generally. The Inch Connection, for instance, grew from a local campaign to save the old railway building from demolition. Run by volunteers, and with a growing collection of local history, the museum has been open on Sundays and Wednesday afternoons since 1998. The Salmon Bothy in Portsoy is another building restored by community action: it now tells the story of the town's unique tradition of sea fishing for salmon. In Laurencekirk, the Grassic Gibbon Centre was established to celebrate Aberdeenshire's best-known writer, once again by local enthusiasts. It has become a focus for the study and celebration of the author of *Sunset Song*, attracting up to 7,000 visitors a year.

There are other community-run museums and heritage centres across Aberdeenshire, such as Fraserburgh Heritage Centre and Maggie's Hoosie in Inverallochy. Independent in spirit and largely self-sustaining, the associations behind them are part of that rich ecology of voluntary action that makes cultural life here both distinctive and so important to the sustainability of its communities. The same commitment exists, as we shall see, in the living traditions and contemporary artistic life of Aberdeenshire.

A living heritage

“Intangible cultural heritage means the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills - as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith - that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage.”

UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage³⁰



Language

The successive inhabitants of Aberdeenshire have created and cared for a rich material culture over more than five thousand years. Its traces are everywhere to be seen, in cairns and castles, tweeds and tartans, skirlie and skinks. Few who come to the North East can fail to sense the particularity of the place. But what can be seen is only part of anyone's culture, and perhaps not the most important part at that. A stone is just a stone until it is invested with meaning. Moving it to a particular place, shaping it and putting it on its end—by such acts, people transform matter into culture. As Neal Ascherson writes:

“*It is not the stone which can be ruined, but the stone artefact created by human sculpting or building or even by the transforming power of human imagination alone.*”

Neal Ascherson, *Stone Voices*³¹

But the transforming power of the human imagination is not always easy to see. The living continuity of Aberdeenshire's heritage is everywhere and nowhere. Above all, it's on the tongue and in the ear—the musical sound of Doric, the language of North East Scotland that is held as deeply as Gaelic is in the West. In the Gaeltacht, the language is visible on road signs, websites and television, but here, like the people who speak it, it's more reticent. The traveller arriving at Aberdeen railway station will see the Gaelic name 'Obar Dheathain' beneath the more familiar one: of Doric there is no sign. In everyday life, Doric speakers often avoid using the language when Scots or English speakers are present, from courtesy or shyness. Some folk say the language is in retreat, as the population of the region has swelled with people from other parts of Britain or the world.

But others, like the members of Buchan Heritage Society, are optimistic and see a rising interest and confidence in the language. They work hard to raise awareness of its pleasures and treasures—every language is a unique way of imagining the world—in schools, community events and through the media. And, though some children are still discouraged from using Doric, there is growing interest among adults and children alike. In October 2012, Doric author Deborah Leslie was appointed Reader in Residence at Aberdeenshire Libraries, a role supported by the Scottish Book Trust and Creative Scotland, to enthuse young readers in an appreciation of the language. The Curriculum for Excellence has encouraged more teachers to bring Doric into the classroom through workshops and the Heritage Society’s publications. Workshop places are filled within a day or two of being advertised and several schools now take part in the Society’s annual writing competition. That the most recent winner of the Doric poetry prize was a Bulgarian child says much about the evolution of Aberdeenshire society and the continuing vitality of Doric in renewing itself.

Ballads and songs

If language is a very particular aspect of North East culture, it is not the only one. The legacy of songs preserved by Gavin Greig and James Duncan has already been noted. In the Bothy Ballads, the songs composed by farm labourers to give voice to the frustrations and injustices common in their lives, words and melody combine around an evolving and distinctive tradition. Peter Buchan of Peterhead collected some of the bawdiest and most subversive of these ballads in the 1820s, with the help of a blind itinerant called James Rankin. They were far too risqué to be included in the ballad collections then becoming popular and have survived in a single manuscript known—how appropriately—as the *Secret Songs of Silence*, which have been, in the words of their first editor, ‘embalmed’ at Harvard University for over a hundred years.³² Not for the first time, beneath that North Eastern decorum, lies something more complex, more radical and more unexpected.

Traditional music

‘We each had songs, or styles we felt comfortable with,’ said Tom, ‘Peter loved doing comedy songs, the type which need to be performed rather than just sung. I enjoyed slower, less rhythmic numbers, and Arthur liked to experiment with different rhythms on Bothy ballads. But one thing was for certain - all our songs would be from the North East.’ ‘That’s right’ Arthur interrupted, ‘anything from south of Stonehaven would be considered “World Music”. Broadmindedness has always been our enemy.’ 9

Tom Spiers and Arthur Watson, of The Gaugers, in *The Living Tradition*³³

The area has been a seemingly inexhaustible well of songs and airs, reels and Strathspeys, repeatedly drawn on by collectors and musicians alike. Some of the most important collections of Scottish traditional music owe much to the North East. The Scots diaspora has contributed too, by conserving and sharing the results. American folklorist Kenneth Goldstein gathered more than 175 songs and ballads from Lucy Stewart of Fetterangus over the course of a year that he spent with the family in 1959.³⁴ Mrs Stewart sang only in the home, and the 1961 Smithsonian Folkways LP of her Child Ballads remains the sole published example of her gifts. Like so many Aberdeenshire folk, she was ‘*embarrassingly modest*’, to use a phrase mentioned to me by one contemporary musician.

Today, in halls and pubs across the Shire, night after night, there are ceilidhs, dances and gigs by musicians playing the widest range of styles. Pipe bands, accordion clubs, Strathspey and reel societies and similar groups abound. There are regular sessions at folk clubs in Cruden Bay, Portsoy (the Salmon Bothy), Fyvie, Stonehaven, The Tin Hut in Gartly and Longside (Ugie Folk Club), marking the strong revival of folk and



traditional music in the North East since the 1990s, seen in the success of local bands like the Old Blind Dogs.

The Stonehaven Folk Festival, which started in 1989, has established its place among the notable events in Scotland. Like so much of this activity, it depends on a huge voluntary effort. Its annual budget of £30,000 is almost entirely raised through ticket sales, the bar, raffles and fundraising events like a Hogmanay Ceilidh: just 10% is from grants or sponsorship. Among the Festival's more unusual offers is the Sunday morning Aqua Ceilidh in Stonehaven's beautiful art deco open-air swimming pool, which features 'Drip the Willow' and 'The Splashing White Sergeant'. Only here.

Gatherings, games and shows

‘*The Highland gathering is a man's affair, from the lusty piping contest to the dignified presents of the clan chiefs with tall eagle-feathers in their bonnets.*’

Ian Finlay, *The Highlands*³⁵

Not only here, but very present here, is the tradition of the Highland Gatherings. The legend of Malcolm III's foot race in Braemar to find the fastest runner for his messenger may be apocryphal, but it belongs here and few seem inclined to give it up as the taproot of the Highland Games.³⁶ In their present form, though, these great occasions owe much to the Victorian enthusiasm for the Scottish Highlands. The earliest still taking place in Aberdeenshire is Lonach Highland Gathering and Games, which has been organised by people in Strathdon since 1823; then comes Braemar (1832), Ballater (1864) and Aboyne (1867). Younger and less grand events are held at Oldmeldrum (1930) and Cornhill (2004). Their longevity, community involvement and singularity make them very special. The combination of unique sporting trials,

such as caber tossing, and traditional music and dance competitions is a potent symbol of local culture.

The Turriff Show, Scotland's largest two-day agricultural event, holds another important place in Aberdeenshire's calendar. Since 1864, this has been the showcase for achievement and innovation in farming, as well as a time for people to congregate and celebrate their way of life. Agricultural shows are not as big or as popular as once they were—fewer people work on the land today—but they make visible another part of the community.

And alongside Highland gatherings and agricultural shows are many other traditional events, including the Doric Festival and several steam fairs. On a different scale is the Temperance Flute Walk, a three-day event held between Christmas and New Year in the coastal villages of St Combs, Inverallochy and Cairnbulg. Invented at a time of religious revival in the 19th century, the walks have taken place annually for over 160 years.³⁷ Like all such rituals, even if the form remains close to the original, the meaning changes with time.

Recreating the tradition

The renewal of living traditions, opened up to new people and other times, is evident throughout Aberdeenshire's cultural life, partly because of the changes that have taken place there over many years. It is often people who have come to live in the area who have taken on the responsibility for keeping traditions alive, or who have started up new ones of their own, like the Bulgarian child winning a prize for her command of Doric. In 2012, Michelle Ward and other members of Stonehaven's business community put on a 12 hour Hogmanay event with street dances, local musicians and bands such as

Blazin' Fiddles. The night was capped by a concert for 6,500 people in the town square headlined by the Red Hot Chilli Pipers. It would be hard to find a better illustration of what UNESCO describes as the constant recreation of intangible heritage.

“*This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity.*”

UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage³⁸

Traditions are constantly being invented, revived, forgotten and adapted. The sea bathing pool at Portsoy was created in 1936, by the simple expedient of laying a concrete wall between two rocky spurs. Locals remember it with affection:

“*In my day, crowds flocked to the pool swimming competitions under the guidance of the popular instructors Danny Sutherland and Moira Mustard. For many of us locals our whole summers were spent at the pool which had both a high and low diving boards in the north east corner.*”

Portsoy Past and Present³⁸

Aberdeenshire's living traditions have friends and advocates across the Shire, each sustaining a different aspect of local dance, language, story, folklore or music. They are rooted in place, but extend surprisingly far, attracting enthusiasts and amateurs to take part. They connect schools and pubs and village halls, children and grandparents, incomers and locals. They are, in a real sense, the lifeblood of Aberdeenshire's communities.



A renewed culture

What do we call heritage? One way of distinguishing heritage from culture as a whole is to see it as something people inherit, from family and community, while culture can be acquired. So the folk music of North East Scotland can be thought of as part of its heritage in a way that the local blues or hip-hop music might not, simply because it has existed among those who have lived here for a very long time. But all culture changes, the ancient and the new. The oldest art must be renewed and made resonant today if it is not to become a museum piece, a mere curio. And Aberdeenshire's artistic life is full of activity and expression, like the blues, that has put down long roots here, but came once from elsewhere. But then, what is local? Castles were unknown in the British Isles before the Normans introduced them and the feudal society they supported. A good part of Doric and Scots vocabulary has its roots in Old Norse.

6 *Banchory Morris Men were formed in 1973 [when an immigrant from John o' Gaunt Morris Men arrived in Banchory and collided with some members of a local dance group who had been trying to do Morris, but had only books to guide them]. Whilst often thought of as 'English', Morris and related dances were popular (as in England and a lot of Europe) in pre-Reformation Scotland, except in the Highlands and Western Isles. However the oldest documented Morris-type sword dance is from the Shetland island of Papa Stour, and the earliest written record of Morris in Britain is from the court of James IV of Scotland. 9*

The Banchory Ternan Morris Men⁴⁰

So the line drawn here between living heritage and renewed culture is inevitably somewhat arbitrary. Although one shades into the other in a genuinely seamless continuum, the focus now turns to how local arts and cultural organisations have built

onto whatever might be thought of as the legacy of the past—their inheritance of place and places, monuments, buildings, stories, music and language.

Performing arts

6 I am a performer now because at the age of 12 I saw my school orchestra on stage during an assembly which whetted my interest in percussion and inspired me to become a professional musician. I was encouraged by my Head-teacher, school teachers, and subject teacher to take the opportunity to participate in music-making. I was lucky that this universal enthusiasm and vision was prevalent throughout the whole school for all subjects.9

Evelyn Glennie, born in Ellon⁴¹

Aberdeenshire's folk traditions have already been touched on, but other forms of music are also strong here. Although there is no professional orchestra or classical music ensemble resident in the North East, various national and international bands perform regularly in Aberdeen. Woodend Music Society, Monymusk Arts Trust and Strathdee Music Club, among other voluntary groups, play a vital role as promoters, bringing professional chamber music to community venues across Aberdeenshire. And there are numerous professional musicians, composers and teachers, often connected with the universities, as well as many gifted amateur musicians and singers living here.

Consequently the classical music life of Aberdeenshire is lively. Orchestras in Deeside and Inverurie perform ambitious programmes of established repertoire, ranging from Corelli to Shostakovich, with the occasional new piece. Groups such as the Stonehaven Chorus and Ythan Singers perform choral music, and there is a wealth of workshop and teaching opportunities. Amateur theatre, though, does not seem to be as popular as amateur music here. There are a few associations in Aberdeen itself, but otherwise

drama groups are quite small, informal or, like Laurencekirk Amateur Musical Society, recently formed.

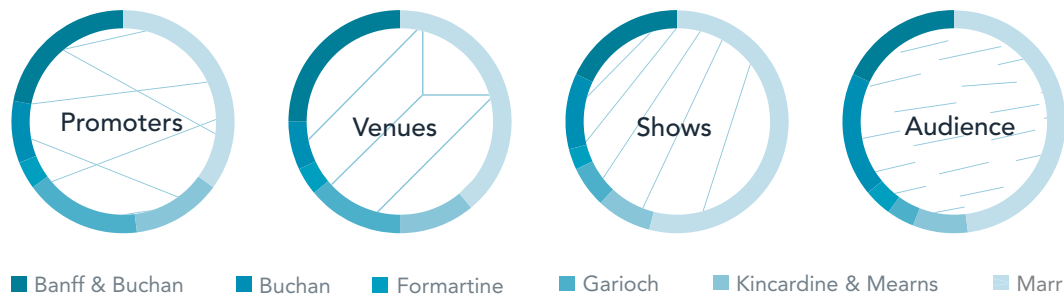
Haddo House, near Ellon, has been part of Aberdeenshire's classical music and theatre life since the Hall was built in the 1890s, specifically to host community cultural activities.⁴² The Gordon family, who then owned the estate, founded Haddo House Choral and Operatic Society after the Second World War. Initially intended as a opportunity for local people to sing alongside professionals, the Society has grown and changed over the decades. There have been periods of great success and ambition, with exceptional professional performers hosted at Haddo, most recently in Donizetti's *L'elisir d'amore*, conducted by Tim Dean in 2011. And there have been more difficult times when resources have been hard to find.

The family's support remained constant though, even after Haddo passed to the National Trust of Scotland. The Haddo User Group, which brings together different amateur and voluntary groups for whom the Hall has been home, is now working to take forward ambitious plans that would see it become a musical centre of excellence in Formartine once again. An early fruit of the new partnerships was the Haddo Arts Festival, 'Voices 2012', held in October that year and opened by Prince Edward. It included a concert by the Scottish Festival Orchestra, a family concert by the Royal Scottish National Orchestra, exhibitions, installations, workshops and master classes. Such a professional event was a great achievement for the partnership of Haddo User Group, Haddo Choral and Operatic Society and the National Trust of Scotland and lays good foundations for future work.

Voluntary groups independently promote professional concerts across the Shire, and often draw on the Council's arts officers for advice and support with legal matters and

fundraising. Strathdee Music Society is a typical case, hosting monthly concerts at the Deeside Theatre, Victory Hall in Aboyne and at Birse and Feughside Parish Church. They have promoted the SCO Strings, Mr McFall's Chamber and the Dunedin Consort among many others, often in partnership with Enterprise Music Scotland, an organisation funded by Creative Scotland to promote live chamber music. Apart from this indirect subsidy, however, like most small music societies, Strathdee Music Club is self-sustaining.

Theatre, and increasingly film, also reaches these rural communities through the support of North East Arts Touring (NEAT), a network established in 1996 by Aberdeen City, Aberdeenshire, Angus and Moray Councils to help local people choose work for their village halls. The scheme is similar to those operating elsewhere in the British Isles and abroad.⁴² Public funding makes it viable for community groups to see theatre companies who would not otherwise be affordable, if only because rural audiences and halls are often too small. The scheme is a successful and cost-effective way of bringing the arts to communities because, as so often, it is local volunteers who take on the work of selling tickets and receiving the performers. However, because it does depend on those local people, the distribution of work is inevitably uneven. Only a third of the promoters live in Marr but they are very active, and put on more than half of all the NEAT shows in Aberdeenshire in 2011/12, as the circles show.



NEAT promoted shows in Aberdeenshire 2011/12

Aberdeenshire's festivals offer further opportunities to enjoy live performance, as well as, for some, the chance to get involved in the community to make things happen. Among these, *sound* is notable partly for its ambitious programme of contemporary music and partly for the breadth of its partnerships. The programme is centred on composers, performers and ensembles specialising in new music and the festival is an important commissioner of new work. In 2012, its innovative 'Out of the Box' event included short, site-specific operas created for the occasion, three of them new commissions. Remarkably, in April 2013, Sound was shortlisted for the Royal Philharmonic Society Awards, alongside the PRS for Music Foundation and the BBC Proms, setting a North East Scotland event alongside two national organisations.

The month long programme of concerts, workshops, composer talks and other activities is a rich offer, though audiences are not always what the organisers hope. But that is a wider challenge in Aberdeenshire with a number of causes. But *sound's* effort to get out across Aberdeenshire is impressive, in a festival that links city venues with Aden Country Park, Inverurie, Aboyne, Banchory, Strathdon, Alford, Fraserburgh and other locations where a suitable space can be found. The partnerships in the network read like a listings of local arts and community organisations. Like Aberdeen International Youth Festival, the New Words Festival and other events, *sound* connects City and Shire in a single programme. This is notable only because there seems to be relatively little joint programming or planning between the cultural organisations in Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire, although audiences go wherever there's something they want to see. There is potential to strengthen collaboration across the invisible border, for everyone's benefit.

Visual art and literature

North East Open Studios (NEOS) also unites City and Shire, with galleries and studios open to visitors for nine days in September each year. To judge by the 168 page paperback book that is the NEOS 2012 catalogue, it is hard to believe the event is barely 10 years old. It was launched in 2003, with support from Aberdeenshire Council arts development team, among others, and is run by a not-for-profit collective of volunteers; it is entirely self-financing.

The first catalogue listed 67 sites, already suggesting something of the artistic riches to be found here. Since then, NEOS has become a cornerstone of cultural life in Aberdeenshire. It is the biggest open studio event in Scotland and it has few peers in the UK. The 2012 catalogue—which acts as an annual directory of artists in the North East—included over 280 artists and galleries, while by 2013, the number taking part had risen to more than 320. Indeed, so large has NEOS become that last year it became a three week rolling programme, starting in the north, moving on to the central area and finishing with Aberdeen and the south of the Shire.

NEOS allows artists to meet people interested in their work, to build relationships with those who like it and, crucially, to sell. For many artists, it is the single most important outlet in the year and some make a substantial part of their annual turnover each September. NEOS also enables them to meet other artists and strengthen networks, something that may be easier in future, since not all the studios will be open at the same time. People feel that visitor numbers have grown substantially in the last four or five years. Artists on the north coast now regularly see visitors from Aberdeen, well over an hour's drive away. Some people come up to the area especially for the event,

staying for a weekend or longer. As the scale of NEOS grows, so does its contribution to the visitor offer.

The range of work is very wide, though painters make up the single largest group, followed by photographers. There is a strong presence of craftspeople and makers: potters and ceramicists, jewellers, textile artists, sculptors, wood turners, stone carvers and others. Their work is individual and varied and while some of it is clearly inspired by place, the connection is less evident than say in Orkney, where both heritage and landscape are recurrent motifs. This matters only insofar as it makes place-based marketing of craft a less obvious option. Touched by Scotland, in Oyne, is the only gallery dedicated exclusively to craft in Aberdeenshire, and one of the largest in the country. It is an important permanent exhibition space for local makers and flies the flag for the value and status of the applied arts.

North East Open Studios could not have become such a success unless there were already large numbers of artists, craftspeople, galleries and exhibition spaces in Aberdeenshire. The area has become home to a large artistic and creative workforce in the past 30 years. While this is broadly true across the UK, the profile of the artists working in the North East is a little different. The combination of remoteness and relatively high property prices makes most of this part of Scotland an unattractive area to young and emerging artists. Cities further south offer an easier foothold into accommodation and the kind of support offered by studio groups and arts or media organisations.

Aberdeenshire, on the other hand, has been attractive to older, more established artists, people who already have a place in the market and a clear sense of both their practice and their career. Many of those I met—including some in the performing arts—had moved to (or sometimes back to) Aberdeenshire in their 30s, 40s or 50s, bringing with them resources and an established body of work. They looked for a property where



they could live and work, as there are few of the studios for rent here that can be found in a city. Others have come to Aberdeenshire with a partner working in the oil or marine industries. Some already had careers as artists; others have discovered or revived a passion for art once they were settled. Fortunately, both through Gray's School of Art on the western edge of Aberdeen, and the many workshops and teachers in the Shire, there is no shortage of places for people to acquire skills. NEOS may have grown so fast and so sustainably because of the knowledge, resources and confidence this mature cohort of artists have brought.

However, no one I spoke to thought that it was easy to sell art in Aberdeenshire. They tended to ascribe this to local culture: either the careful habits of Aberdeenshire folk with '*short arms and deep pockets*' as one person put it, or the perceived interests of oil executives. But a more nuanced picture often emerged as we talked further, which suggested that there were in fact plenty of people with money to spend who were looking for quality. One businessperson, with outlets in Aberdeenshire and elsewhere in Scotland, said that his North East business had been unaffected by the recession. Oil workers were quite willing to spend several thousand pounds on decorative items for their homes. A gallery owner told me that most exhibitions sold out completely, at prices between £500 and £3,000. Clearly, not everyone sells well but there is money in the North East to sustain a prosperous local art market. The key, as ever, is making the right offer, in the right way, to the right people.

Beyond the commercial arts world are two unusual arts organisations that have each, in their own ways, contributed to Aberdeenshire's international reputation in contemporary art. Scottish Sculpture Workshop (SSW), in Lumsden, is the only place in Britain, and perhaps even in the world, where artists can cast their own work in bronze. Consequently, it attracts a steady stream of visitors from across Scotland, the

UK and much further afield. Artists live in Lumsden for anything from a few days to a few months, doing their own work, but also contributing to SSW's exploratory projects—such as the 'Maker's Meal', in which every element, including furniture, plates, cutlery and food, was made by artists.⁴³ Alongside its support for artists and students, SSW is a centre for artists' residencies and projects, often undertaken in partnership with others, including, at various times, the University of Aberdeen and Robert Gordon University. It holds exhibitions in a small gallery space, runs regular workshops and art classes and hosts talks. In recent years artists at SSW have become engaged with questions of land, food, ecology and sustainability that naturally arise from its location in the shadow of Aberdeenshire's mountains.

6 *For the people who started Deveron Arts, the first impetus was personal. They had lived and worked in other places and countries and wanted to bring some of their ideas and influences to Huntly. Art seemed to be a good process to confront the needs of a local context like Huntly.* 9

Nuno Sacramento and Claudia Zeiske, *Artocracy*⁴⁵

Not far away, in Huntly, Deveron Arts has also developed an approach to contemporary art that reflects its own distinctive place in the world. Although, thanks to its position on the Aberdeen–Inverness railway line, Huntly is less isolated than Lumsden, it is still too remote to allow most artists to work there without staying at least a night. Since its creation in 1995, Deveron Arts has therefore evolved a practice based on residencies, with artists coming to spend days, weeks or longer living and working in Huntly. Without a building base, or the resources to secure one, they hit on the idea of describing the town as their venue, which suited the commitment to engage local people in exploring key questions about life in Huntly through artistic methods. Like SSW, NEOS and many other local organisations, Deveron Arts has become increasingly

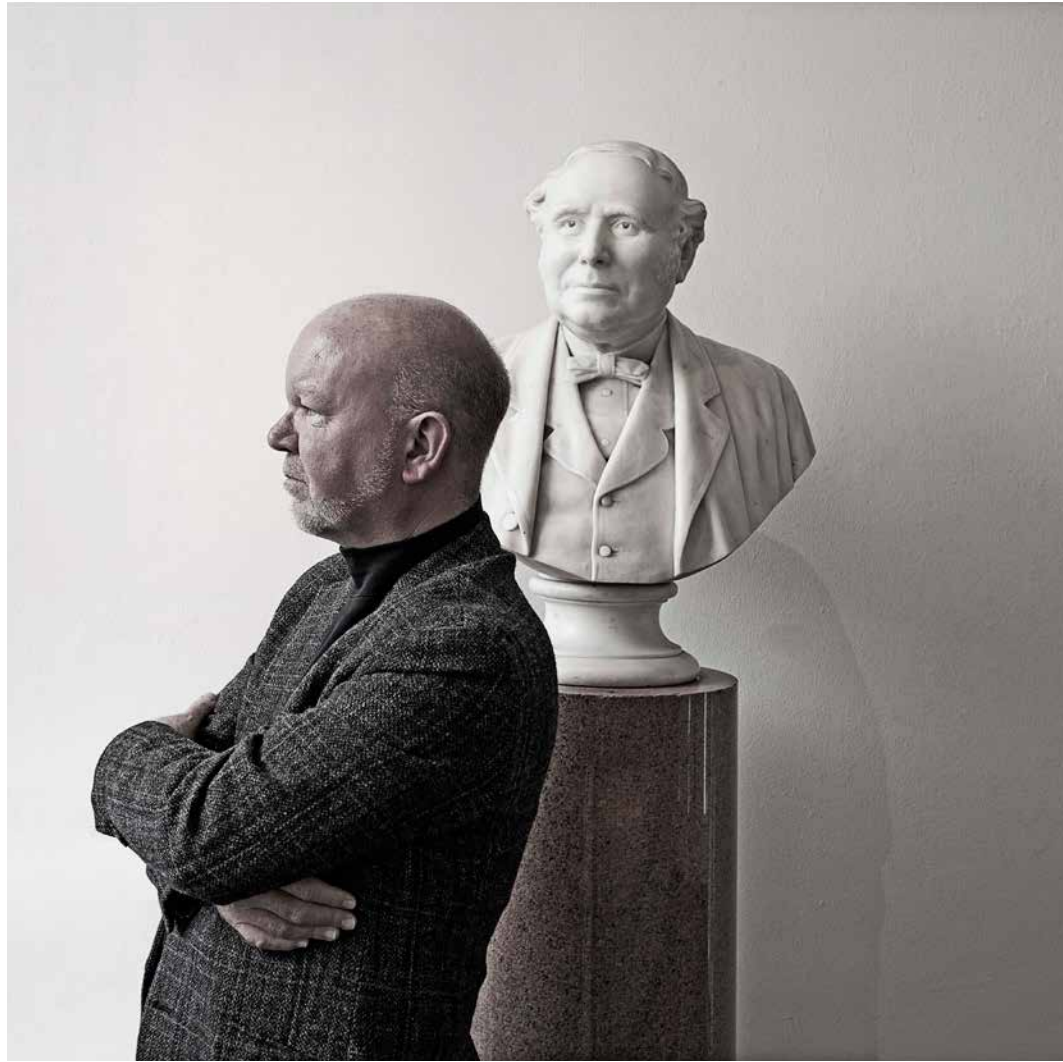
ambitious over the years, often bringing artists from abroad to work in Huntly. Recent residencies have involved artists from China, Zimbabwe, Brazil and Switzerland.

One of the links between Scottish Sculpture Workshop and Deveron Arts is the way they have turned the limitations of location and resource base into innovative practice that makes their contribution to Aberdeenshire and Scotland's creative life unique. The lesson of working with what one has, and turning potential weaknesses into distinctive strengths, is echoed again and again in the activities of arts and cultural groups in the area.

6 *Public Art offers Aberdeenshire, its people and partners, the opportunity to express what is special and unique about our environment.* 9

Aberdeenshire Council, *Public Art Guidance Note*⁴⁶

Aberdeenshire Council and the local authorities that preceded it have invested time, care and resources into public art across the Shire. Whilst there are plenty of monumental and sculptural pieces, such as David Annand's *The Net* in Fraserburgh, Andy Scott's *Otter* in Ellon or the *Turra Coo* in Turriff, there is more that takes the form of subtle interventions within wider environmental improvements, such as John Maine's bollards and paving stones in Inverurie or Willie Wares' slate cairn above Stonehaven. This work is important in guaranteeing the continuing evolution of places in Aberdeenshire at a time when development within a globalising economy can lead to increasingly uniform buildings. But it is also important in opening up places to newcomers and making them more legible to visitors. As the artist Michael Johnson says in his strategy for public art in Ellon:



6 *Ellon has grown rapidly as have many satellite communities around Aberdeen since the growth of the oil industry. By the weight of numbers and work patterns newer residents tend to find themselves on the outer edge of the community knowing less about the town and generally participating less in the community spirit.* 9

Michael Johnson, *Ellon Art Strategy*¹⁷

It is notable that Johnson's plan focuses on making the most of assets that he sees as underappreciated within the town, including several walks and historic sites. Once again the answer seems to be not widespread change or a big statement, but to value the existing qualities of a place.

Finally, a word must be said about literature, which, not requiring dedicated buildings for its production or consumption, is apt to be even less visible than other art forms. The exception, of course, is the Council's Library Service whose buildings in 36 communities across the Shire physically represent the value of reading. Often co-located with schools, as at Alford or Bracoden, the libraries generally offer a full range of services and the Council has continued to invest in new facilities of a high standard, as at Westhill. The library remains a widely appreciated and approachable cultural space and the Council uses its network to extend access through events. In addition to the usual reading promotion activities, libraries host a film club (Inverurie), pop-up museums (Westhill), early reading groups (Portlethen), craft activities (Cruden Bay), heritage society talks (New Pitsligo) and more. No fewer than 65 library events are listed on the Council website, just for the last 10 days of February 2014.

Readers need writers and the North East Writers exists to support local authors. Formed by local enthusiasts to put on the first Wordfringe festival in May 2006, the group has grown since, together with its festival, which was renamed New Words and moved to

a September date in 2010. Inevitably, Aberdeen is its focus, but it reaches across the Shire, for instance through a weekend of events linked to Huntly Hairst Food and Farming Festival. Occasional poetry readings, author talks and open mic nights are held at venues such as Better Read Books in Ellon. There are also half a dozen writers' groups in places such as Banff, Stonehaven and Banchory.

A World in a grain of sand

In the Deeside town of Banchory, 20 miles from the centre of Aberdeen, is an arts centre so characteristic that it is almost a microcosm of Aberdeenshire's cultural life. Banchory (Banchory-Ternan, until the 1970s) is an ancient settlement, its foundation traditionally attributed to the saint whose name it once bore. Its life has mostly been in farming, forestry and associated activities but tourism is now important to this gateway to Royal Deeside. It has also become a commuter town for Aberdeen: each morning a twelfth of its people leave for work elsewhere.⁴⁸ The population was 2,355 in 1971, before the oil. Forty years later, in 2011, it had almost tripled to 7,111.⁴⁹ Growth continues apace: the housing stock in Banchory grew by 18.4% between 2001 and 2008. That expansion is associated with considerable prosperity, and average earnings in the town are £41,704, compared to £34,028 in the Shire as a whole; barely one resident in a hundred is looking for work.

Banchory is a lively town with many sports, cultural and community groups. There are daytime and evening classes in everything from painting to Tai Chi. Local people are very involved in environmental concerns including recycling, reducing carbon emissions and improving the quality of local walks and natural spaces. There's a monthly farmer's market and campaigns to promote gardening and local produce. And, at the edge of

the town, in some former agricultural buildings leased from the Leys Estate, is an arts centre called Woodend Barn.

The origins and development of Woodend Barn have been admirably set out in John Hargreaves' history, published in 2005 to mark its first ten years. They are a case study in community development. It has been a long path from its origins, in a 1992 community play marking the 400th anniversary of Crathes Castle, to its present incarnation as a professional arts centre presenting fine music, theatre, dance and visual art alongside workshops and community activities. And, like many paths in this part of the world, it has sometimes been hard going. There have been forks when it was unclear which direction was best; but there has also been fresh air, good ground under foot and some breathtaking views.

What makes Woodend Barn so characteristic of Aberdeenshire's arts and cultural life is that its success has depended on bringing together people with very different backgrounds, positions, interests and skills. Newcomers to Banchory (and two thirds of its population are newcomers) have brought new ideas, expectations, energy and contacts, but without the support and engagement of older residents—and none older than the Burnett family of Crathes and the Leys Estate who have invested so much in the buildings—it would have been impossible to create anything that would take root in this soil.

From that necessary coalition has come much of what makes Woodend Barn distinctive, such as the early decision to encourage people with special interests to set up autonomous groups under the umbrella of Woodend Arts Association. This led to the creation of the Woodend Music Society, the Lang Byre Gallery committee, the Third Stage group and others, each responsible for a different aspect of the Barn's offering. It allowed new ideas, such as the thriving allotments behind the main building or Doctoral Research



with Gray's School of Art, that conventional arts managers might not have considered, but which enrich the Barn in so many ways. It has inscribed balancing the interests of professional artists *and* community groups, of commerce *and* volunteering, into the very fabric of the place.

All this makes Woodend Barn a difficult organisation to categorise, as, in their different ways, are Deveron Arts, the Scottish International Boat Festival, the North East Folklore Archive or Haddo House. Because so many of the Shire's cultural groups have emerged from individual passions, local resources and alliances of happenstance (rather than the dreams of planners and policymakers) they have often taken unusual forms. As a result, they can be difficult for outsiders to understand. In assessing the work of the Lang Byre Gallery, does one focus on the Christmas exhibition of LP-sized artwork by local artists, the retrospective of engravings by Hilary Paynter or the experimental *Sounding Drawing* work of Anne Douglas and Kathleen Coessens? The programme included all of them in the second half of 2012, with other exhibitions and events besides.

The answer, of course, is that the character of the Gallery, as of Woodend Barn as a whole and of so much of the rest of the Shire's cultural life, includes all of these things. And crucially, it does not include them all wishing that it could dispense with some. It includes them all knowing that the whole, unexpected as it may sometimes be, is more important than any of the constituent parts and that, even if they only sit side by side without interacting at all—as people themselves often do in complex societies such as Aberdeenshire—their tacit acknowledgement of one another is vital. It is not always easy, but such cooperation is a necessary part of living and working in a place whose resources and people are rich but dispersed so that, in the words once again of John R. Allan, '*we make the most of each other*'.

A distinctive voice in contemporary culture

- Pat Dunn *Well I suppose the land would have been first, ken.*
- Gavin Renwick *That's what always came first?*
- Pat Dunn *Well that was your living. You had to have the land in good nick to get the good crops.*
- Chris Freemantle *It sounds like we're being sentimental about this. It's important, people come from all over the world, it's important that they understand where they are.*
- Pat Dunn *Aye, if they dinnae know about things, there's nothing to be said.*

Gray's School of Art and SSW, *Inthrow*⁵⁰

Everything starts with the land. It is the land that makes Aberdeenshire. It draws people here, and keeps them here once they have come. It nourishes them, it warms them and it gives them recreation. In all my conversations, people would come back to the special qualities of this place, its hills and valleys, its rivers, woods and wild places, its beaches, cliffs and seas. The Council implicitly recognises this: its vision, constantly repeated, is to serve Aberdeenshire *'from mountain to sea'*.

And that importance can be seen in the work of the contemporary art organisations working here. Scottish Sculpture Workshop has a project called 'Natural Bennachie', as part of the Year of Natural Scotland, with artists' commissions, workshops and other activities exploring the nature and meaning of this mountain and its natural environment. But this is not a new idea in SSW's work. Ten years ago they were working with Gray's School of Art on 'Inthrow', an artist-led research project into the

use of a field. More recent ideas have included their 'Slow Prototypes' and 'Hedge', a collaboration with the Critical Practice Research Cluster to explore the spaces and values that organise rural areas.

Deveron Arts in Huntly has produced a succession of commissions exploring key aspects of the land, often with a particular emphasis on food, as in Simon Preston's recent project 'The Town is the Menu'. It now has funds to develop the Institute of Walking, which builds on projects like its 'Slow Marathon' and the Michael Höpfner residency, 'Walking Off the Grid', to explore connections between contemporary art, walking, landscape, wellbeing and sustainability. Woodend Barn has also been concerned with the land, in its allotments and focus on the culture of food production.

Walking is central to Aberdeenshire's culture. Many residents walk for pleasure, locally or in the mountains and open spaces of the Shire. Walking is also one of the principal attractions of Aberdeenshire as a visitor destination and there are hundreds of planned walks in the Shire on Internet sites. The Council promotes it through long distance paths such as the Deeside Way, Formartine and Buchan Way, the Aberdeenshire Coastal Path and its Core Paths Plan.

☞ *On the final day we walked up Gleann Einich to Loch Einich. As the twisted Scots pines gave way to heathery moors, the cloud lifted to reveal spectacular buttresses of dark rock, and snow-lined gullies pointing up to broad white peaks. There was no sign of human life, so I was disappointed that we'd seen only a few grouse and ravens. Then a vast, dark V-shape appeared high above us, circled and dipped its head to inspect us. It was unmistakably, a golden eagle. ☞*

The Guardian, 11 February 2011



If we see land or, perhaps better, *place*, as embracing not just earth, but sky and sea as well, and all the nourishment, shelter, energy and recreation that it offers, the connections with much of Aberdeenshire's cultural life, from boats to ballads, painting to performing, become clearer. That broader understanding also connects place and culture with Aberdeenshire people's everyday concerns about how to conserve a unique area and its quality of life in a changing world, whose pressures range from the cost of petrol and empty shops to wind turbines and the post-oil economy.

It's not that culture can answer those concerns, though as a growing activity in a diversifying economy, it has its part to play. But culture doesn't offer answers because none of the important questions have answers. They are not crossword puzzles with clever solutions. They are existential problems faced by humanity globally that must be responded to locally. But if culture has no answers, it does offer an approachable, enjoyable and different way of discussing the questions. It brings new insights and unexpected ideas because its languages are not only rational but also experiential, concerned with feelings as much as ideas, and able to connect seemingly unconnected things.

Art invites us to stop what we're doing and think about it; to feel where we are and why; to ask where we are or might be going.

With all its assets—artists and creative people, cultural organisations, a uniquely rich tangible and intangible heritage, a business sector expert in sustainability and energy, great universities and relative prosperity—there is a vital opportunity for Aberdeenshire to focus on core questions of our sustainable future. What do we use land for and how? What are the best ways of feeding ourselves and providing energy? How do we relate to the natural world and the creatures and plants we share it with? What is a sustainable

future in a distant rural area? How can we renew ourselves, mind, body and spirit, here, now, in this place?

This need not involve a big change in what people are already doing. As has been suggested, several organisations and individual artists are working on just these kinds of questions. But there is an opportunity to make the whole much greater by bringing a range of unconnected and often unseen parts together. With commitment and a clear vision, Aberdeenshire could be recognised in a very few years as an international centre of excellence in culture and sustainability.



4

CULTURE AND COMMUNITY

In the winds of change

“Kinraddie lands had been won by a Norman childe, Cospatric de Gondeshil, in the days of William the Lyon, when gryphons and suchlike beasts still roamed the Scots countryside and folk would waken in their beds to hear the children screaming, with a great wolf-beast, come through the hide window, tearing at their throats.”

Lewis Grassic Gibbon, *Sunset Song*, 1932

“Dead things had always been special to him. Their delicate coldness. The feel of the skin. The ripe, sweet smell as they decayed. As they returned to God.”

Stuart MacBride, *Cold Granite*, 2005

The gulf between *Sunset Song* and *Cold Granite* is as wide as can easily be imagined, and yet it spans just 30 miles and 73 years—a single lifetime. Lewis Grassic Gibbon might have struggled to imagine Tartan Noir either as fact or literature, as he would have struggled to imagine the mechanical behemoths that now plough the slopes of the Mearns where man and beast once walked in step. The farming life he knew in childhood and described so powerfully—and controversially, as far as his erstwhile neighbours in Laurencekirk were concerned—has been gone at least two generations. In 1939, there were 6,250 horses in Orkney; twenty years later there were just 718, more than half of them ponies.⁵¹ Aberdeenshire was much the same. Indeed, it is said that a horse was more important to a farmer than a wife, once. Horses and men have left the land to be replaced by John Deere tractors taller than houses. They furrow the



earth as their cousins, the industrial trawlers of the 21st century, furrow the sea. Never in the fields of human farming has so much been produced for so many, by so few. And, perhaps, so little valued.

Agriculture remains central to Aberdeenshire's economy and its identity, though it now employs only about 9,000 people, many of whom also do other work.⁵² Ten times as many people are employed in other industries. For instance, in Kincardineshire and Mearns, more people work in banking or transport or construction than in agriculture and fishing together.⁵³ The town of Westhill, which didn't exist in 1960, was recently designated a 'Global Subsea Centre of Excellence' in recognition of its high tech industries that employ 6,000 people.⁵⁴ The 'Energetica' corridor between North Aberdeen and Peterhead is just the flagship of future development in a Shire that is 'becoming a leading destination for innovation, knowledge, learning and skills in current and future energy generation, hosting the companies, organisations and research institutions that will collaborate to meet the world's energy challenges'.⁵⁵

Aberdeenshire gives the lie to the cliché about rural areas being stuck in the past, slow to change. Few places can have changed as profoundly as North East Scotland since the discovery of North Sea Oil. The huge growth in the numbers of people living here has transformed its economy, demographics, social structures and culture. What is striking, though, is how little dissatisfaction with that alteration I heard from residents. People in their sixties and seventies who had lived through it all were consistently positive about it, appreciative of the benefits and especially of the better education and work opportunities open to their children and grandchildren. Old North East values of hard work, learning and adaptability seem to have served Aberdeenshire well in adjusting from the world of horses to the world of turbines.

That said, Aberdeenshire's communities, those 60 or more settlements that have clung so long to this land, have come under a great deal of pressure as a result of that change. That the pressure has often come from sought-after growth and prosperity rather than post-industrial decline, as in other parts of the country, should not obscure the very real difficulties it can present.

The cost of housing is one instance that affects everyone, directly or indirectly. Existing property owners have seen their wealth rise, at least on paper. But first-time buyers, people renting in the open market and those looking for business premises all find that accommodation takes a larger part of their budgets than in other parts of the country. In late 2013, the average house price in Aberdeenshire was about £220,000, compared to £133,000 in Fife and £97,500 in North East England. Indeed, outside London, only East Renfrewshire and South East England can match Aberdeenshire's house prices.⁵⁵ Among other effects, high property costs make Aberdeenshire less attractive to young artists and start-up creative businesses, who find much cheaper accommodation and more contacts closer to the Central Belt. So it is not surprising that the profile of creative practitioners in Aberdeenshire is typically older and more established.

Along the north coast, from Portsoy to Fraserburgh and elsewhere, the streets are lined with empty shops. The butchers and bakers who'd survived the onward march of national retail chains are succumbing to the edge of town supermarkets drawn to places like Huntly and Inverurie by growing populations with professional salaries. Closer to Aberdeen, where permanent residents live alongside commuters and mobile professionals who expect to stay a few years at most, it is not always easy to build a cohesive community, not least because different groups may have different ideas of what local development is desirable. Incomers who are committed to putting down

roots sometimes struggle to find a way in to the existing community: people spoke again and again about how hard it can be to find out what is going on locally.

And yet, as this study shows, there is a great deal going on in local cultural life, from dance classes to folk festivals, plays to writing groups, heritage centres, galleries and the rest. In a paper written following the Council's changes to its arts funding in 2011, Mark Hope, Chair of Woodend Arts Association, included some striking data about the scale of this activity. According to these, in 2009 the arts and cultural organisations supported by Aberdeenshire Council employed 53 staff and 722 volunteers and had a collective turnover of £2.6 million.⁵⁷ He also calculated that they had almost 200,000 audience members and participants in activities, though many will have been repeat visitors. These figures significantly understate the scale of Aberdeenshire's arts and cultural activity because, as the unavoidably incomplete lists in the appendix show, there are far more groups than those that received funding from the Council in 2009. And each one of them, large and small, professional and amateur, makes a valuable contribution to their community.

The Pinning Stones

“The appearance of the wall can be dramatically altered if pinning stones are missed out during the tamping stage of the work. This can often happen as recent repointing practices have tended to ignore the “time consuming” effort that is required to replace the small stones. [...] This approach not only creates the wrong appearance but it is also a false economy. Because of the increased amount of mortar that has to be used and will be exposed to the weather, there is a greater risk that it will decay faster and the expected life of the repointed work will be much reduced.”

Historic Scotland, *Repointing Rubble Stonework*⁵⁸



Next time you're in an older part of town, take a look at the walls of the houses. You'll see a lot of granite, of different kinds, the little mica crystals glinting silver in the sun, the way new-fallen snow glitters in the morning light. In some places, you will see dark gabbro or old red sandstone where the walls are not harled. The finer buildings will be ashlar—smooth dressed stone with pencil-thin mortar joints—but most are humble, masonry rubble walls. For these, Aberdeenshire masons, like their peers elsewhere Scotland, used large rectangular blocks, laid horizontally, as far as possible, and filled any spaces left with small stones set in generous quantities of mortar.

These are pinning stones. They don't look like much—odd sizes and shapes, selected only to fit a space. But each is different and collectively they play a critical role in holding the wall, the house, together. As Historic Scotland says, it is a false economy not to maintain the pinning stones when looking after a wall: repointing without them seems quicker, but the work does not last and will have to be redone much sooner.

Pinning stones are one of the many little things by which you know you're in North East Scotland. They give buildings a different texture and it's obvious, once you notice them, that masons often took pleasure in their arrangement. Occasionally a house will have been painted to accentuate the patterns made by its stonework. In smarter Victorian buildings, they are often arranged in triplets between the main blocks, just for effect.

Policymakers and planners rarely pay much attention to Aberdeenshire's culture. Like the Bank of Scotland's quality of life survey, they focus on the big, chunky building blocks—the economy, jobs, education, social services, housing, transport and so on. And understandably so: these are all important and they're very obvious. But their importance should not blind us to what lies between them, the cultural and social fabric of communities, the pinning stones that stop the mortar from cracking and

flaking away. A castle here, a choir there, a gallery, a museum, a folk festival: none of them is that important in itself, except to the people who run them, take part and love what they offer. It's easy to think that they would not be missed, or could be replaced. It's easier still not to notice them at all.

Happily, Aberdeenshire Council does recognise the importance of culture, making it a cornerstone of its vision, which is:

Helping to create and sustain the best quality of life for all through...

- *happy, healthy and confident people*
- *safe, friendly and lively communities*
- *an enterprising and adaptable economy*
- *our special environment and diverse culture*

Aberdeenshire Council Vision⁵⁹

The key, though, is to recognise that culture, in all its varied, complex and interlocking forms, is also part of what strengthens people, community, the economy and even the environment.

Aberdeenshire does not have many large or famous cultural institutions—no Guggenheim, V&A or even Baltic to draw admiring looks and visitors. The professional arts organisations offer excellent programmes, but they do so on very small amounts of money compared to their peers elsewhere. A single gallery like Nottingham Contemporary has more staff than all the organisations funded by Creative Scotland in Aberdeenshire put together. Around those professional organisations, though, are many more run by volunteers who give their time week after week, year after year.

They do it, like the supporters of Banff Castle or in Finzean or at Strathdee Music Club, not just because they love it but also because they want to make a difference in their communities. They know that good quality of life is not only a matter of house prices, good schools and jobs. It is something that has to be created, day by day, in social relations—and maintained, too, like a house.

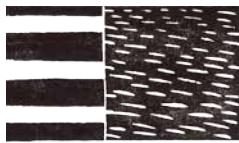
To go from Fraserburgh to Torphins or from Westhill to Macduff is to move between worlds. Each place faces distinct challenges linked to its history, location, demographics and industry. Sometimes the challenges are evident to the casual observer, but often they are not because they arise from adjusting to growth and the changes it brings to how people live. They affect invisible things like quality of life, community spirit and whether people want to stay somewhere. Invisible things can sometimes be seen by proxy indicators: community spirit is evident in the 167 people coming to a Burns Nicht supper at Finzean Village Hall, or the fact that there was barely room on the stage for everyone in the community play.

But what matters about those events, and the hundred of others like them that happen week in, week out across the Shire, is how they create those invisible things that matter so much to people. A sense of community, a good quality of life, belonging, energy—they might be hard to measure and account for, but no one has much difficulty feeling them in everyday life. Aberdeenshire's cultural life is rooted in its communities, in the time and imagination given by tens of thousands of people, and the inspiration they get from the gifted professionals they bring into their communities. It is often understated, self-reliant and resilient. It is immensely varied in style and tone. It is one of the most important ways in which communities are responding and adapting to change.

Between the big blocks of public policy—the economy, education, health and housing—are the many small and heterogeneous stones of culture, each one making place, making community, making people. It is time they were attended to.

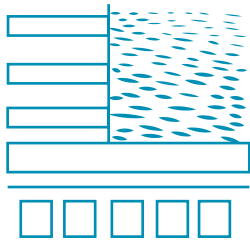
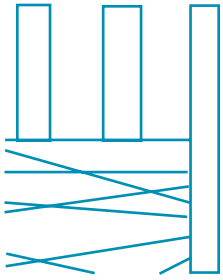
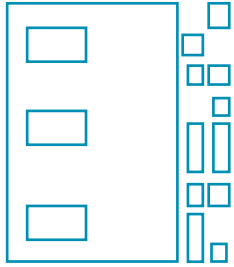
PART TWO





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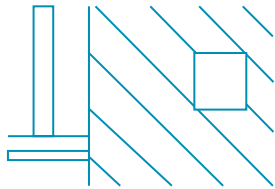
CULTURAL ASSETS



In researching Aberdeenshire's cultural life for this book, I tried to create as complete a map as possible of the Shire's culture assets and activities. Fiona Jack, a local artist, did much of the background research. The information is included on the project blog, <http://aberdeenshirecultureportrait.wordpress.com>, with Internet links where they exist.

The groups are included here to give a sense of the number and diversity of the pinning stones that make up the Shire's cultural life. Because that life extends so far, involves so many people and changes all the time, these pages cannot hope to be complete or to avoid errors. This is a snapshot of a moment in time: how quickly it becomes out dated may be one sign of change in Aberdeenshire's culture.

ARTS



Arts Organisations

Buchan Development Partnership, independent community led group

Creative Retreat, Banff

Creative Cultures, North East creative industries directory

Deveron Arts, contemporary arts organisation in Huntly

GANE, Audience development for NE arts and cultural organisations

Leisureland, Aberdeenshire Council's equipment hire resource in Inverurie

Monymusk Arts Trust, supporting all forms of art in the local area

NEAT (North East Arts Touring), brings touring theatre to rural venues

NEOS (North East Open Studios), artists, makers and galleries exhibiting during September in the North East.

Scottish Sculpture Workshop (Lumsden), residential and making facility for artists

Third Stage, arts activities & informal classes for older people in Banchory

Voluntary Arts Scotland, supporting amateur arts and crafts participation

Woodend Barn, Aberdeenshire's only professional multi-arts centre and independent art gallery



Art Galleries

ArtIncs, Johnshaven

Airt Gallery, Kintore

Ava Gallery, Fyvie

Blairs Museum, Blairs

Butterworth Gallery, Ballogie

Country Frames Gallery, Inch

Cowden Studio & Gallery, Drumlithie

Durno Gallery, Durno

Lang Byre Gallery, Banchory

Larks Gallery, Ballater

Mearns Art House, Stonehaven

Milton Art Gallery, Crathes

Mill of Benholm, Johnshaven

Platform 22, Torphins

Starfish Studio, Johnshaven

Syllavethy Gallery, Alford

Tarts and Crafts, Balmedie

The Butterworth Gallery, Aboyne

The Lost Gallery, Strathdon

Tolquhon Gallery, Tarves

Touched by Scotland, Inch

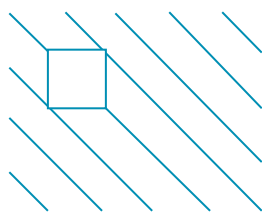


Art Forums

Banff & Buchan Arts Forum

Gordon Forum for the Arts

Kincardine & Deeside Arts Forum



Creative Workshops & Art Groups

Aboyne Craft Club, Aboyne

Art Attack Group, Mintlaw

Association of Buchan Crafters,
Banff, Mintlaw, Peterhead, Ellon

Bennachie Spinners and Weavers

Bennachie Art and Craft
Appreciation Society, Inverurie

Banff Art Club, Banff

Broadsea Art Club, Fraserburgh

Celtic Cultural Circle, Aboyne

Common Threads, Banff

Coastal Colourists, Johnshaven

Cuminestown Art Group

Deeside Camera Club, Aboyne

Deveron Camera Club, Banff

Donside Camera Club, Alford

Ellon Photographic Group

Ellon and District Art Club, Ellon

Floral Art Club, Westhill

Friends of Duff House, Banff

Fraserburgh Visual Arts Group

Fraserburgh Photographic Society

Garioch Art Club

Grampian Guild of Spinners and
Weavers

Lauraine's Mobile Crafts, Banff,
Turriff, Huntly

Mearns Camera Club, Stonehaven

New Pitsligo Lace Club

Oldmeldrum Camera Club

Peterhead District Floral Art Club

Peterhead Camera Club

Puds and Patch Quilt Group,
Stonehaven

Russell Gurney Weavers, Turriff

Stonehaven and District Floral Art
Club

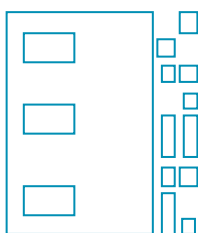
The Quilt Quine, Crathes

Turriffic Arts Group, Turriff

Udny & Pitmedden Art Club,
Oldmeldrum

Upper Deeside Arts Society, Aboyne

DANCE



Clubs

Aboyne Scottish Country Dance Group, Aboyne

Ballater Old Time Dancing, Ballater

Ballroom and Latin with Levena, Inverurie

Banchory Scottish Country Dancing Club, Banchory

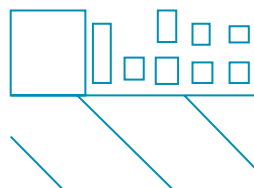
Banchory Ternan Morris Men, Banchory

Dance NE Scotland, Banff, Huntly, Alford

Howe Trinity Scottish Country Dancing, Alford

Peterhead Scottish Country Dance Club, Peterhead

St. Ninians Scottish Country Dancing Class, Turriff



Schools of Dance

Aberdeenshire Schools Youth Dance Company

Ann Murray School of Highland Dancing, Alford

Anne Buchan School of Dance, Fraserburgh, Mintlaw, Peterhead

Annette Cameron School of Dance, Ellon

Arlene Penny School of Dancing, Ellon

Avril Carnie School of Highland Dancing, Mintlaw

Danz Creations, Balmedie

Dance Dimensions, Portlethen

Deeside Dance Centre, Banchory, Aboyne

Evolution Dance School, Newtonhill

Jessiman Dance School, Huntly, Turriff

Kdance, Fraserburgh

Lawrence Dance Academy, Mintlaw, Peterhead, Newburgh

Mearns Country Western Dance, Laurencekirk

Pam Dignan Dancers, Westhill

Rosaline Hendry School of Highland Dancing, Ellon

Slesser School of Dance, Peterhead

Tooters, Aberdeenshire

Walker School of Highland Dance, Stonehaven

Xpressions Hiphop Dance Group, Inverurie

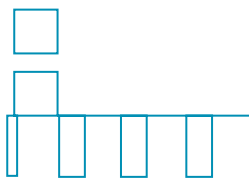
Yvonne Milne Dance School, Turriff



Traditional Dance Groups

Gaorsach Rapper and Step

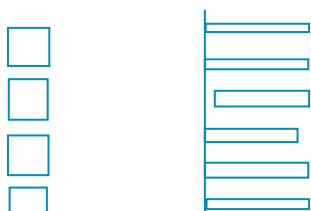
Flying Pieman Ceilidh Band



Scottish Culture and Traditions

Scottish Culture and Traditions
Association

FESTIVALS



Festivals of Art and Culture

March-April: **Puppet Animation Festival**, national festival and the UK's largest annual performing arts event for children

May: **Coast Festival**, annual weekend of arts events in Banff and Macduff

June: **Inverurie Jazz Festival**, Jazz weekend in Inverurie organised by Garioch Jazz Club

July: **Aboyne & Deeside Festival**, 21 year old arts festival in Aboyne, Banchory, Crathes and Tarland

July: **Garioch Theatre Festival**, 8 year old theatre festival in Inverurie

July: **Stonehaven Folk Festival**, Traditional music weekend marking its 25th anniversary in 2013

September: **New Words**, festival of the spoken and written word in performance across Aberdeenshire

September: **North East Open Studios (NEOS)**, Scotland's largest open studios event with almost 300 local artists

October: **Haddo Arts Festival**, music and arts festival at Haddo House, held for the first time in 2012

October: **Luminate Scotland**, Scotland's creative ageing festival

October-November: **s.o.u.n.d. Festival**, New music performances and workshops across the breadth of Aberdeenshire



Festivals of Place and Tradition

June: **Cornhill Highland Games**, founded in 2004

June: **Grampian Country Fair**, Fyvie Castle

June: **Taste of Grampian**, Inverurie. Festival of food and drink

June: **Scottish Traditional Boat Festival**, celebrating the maritime culture of Portsoy and Aberdeenshire

August: **Aboyne Highland Games**, Sports, dance, music and Scottish tradition since 1867

August: **Ballater Highland Games**, Instituted in 1864

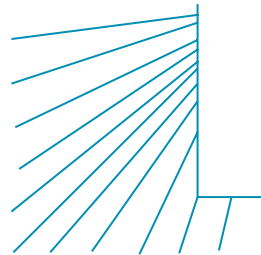
August: **Lonach Highland Gathering and Games**, Organised by people in Strathdon since 1823

August: **The Turriff Show**, Two-day Agricultural show founded in 1864

September: **Braemar Gathering**, Highland Games held in Royal Deeside since 1832

September-October: **Doric Festival**, 20 year old celebration of local language, literature and traditions

December: **Stonehaven Fireball Festival**, unique New Year's Eve event in Stonehaven

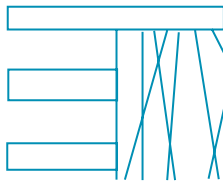


Festivals of People and Issues

August: **Aberdeen International Youth Festival (AIYF)**, 40 year old festival of young people's creativity

October: **The Value of Age**, A new event in 2012, organised by Gordon Forum for the Arts as part of Luminare, Scotland's creative ageing festival

MUSIC



Bands

Identity Crisis, 50's /60's/ 70's/ rock/
country music

Old Blind Dogs

Whigmaleerie, Ceilidh Dance Band

Classical and choral

Banchory Singers

City of Roses

Combined Treble Voice Choir

Deveron Singers

Friends of Scottish Opera

Haddo House Choral & Operatic
Society

Haddo Voices

Inverurie Choral Society

Monymusk Arts Trust

Strathdee Music Club

Spectrum Singers

The Stonehaven Chorus

Upper Deeside Music

Woodend Music Society

Ythan Singers

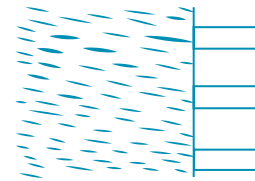


Jazz / Contemporary Music

Daemons

Garioch Jazz Club

Stoney Jazz Cafe



Folk

Cruden Bay Folk Club

Folk at the Salmon Bothy, Portsoy
(3rd Friday of the month)

Fyvie Folk Club

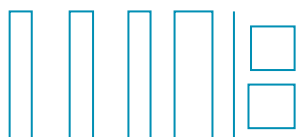
Huntly Folk Club

Stonehaven Folk Club

The Tin Hut, Monthly acoustic nights,
folk, traditional and bluegrass (Gartly
nr. Huntly)

Tarves Folk Club

Ugie Folk Club



Orchestras

Deeside Orchestra

Inverurie Orchestra, founded by local people in 2007

Promoters and Music Societies

Deeside Musical Society

Gadie Music

HUG (Haddo User Group)

Inverurie Music, Inverurie

North East Classical Guitar Society

Music Central, Huntly

Monymusk Arts Trust, Monymusk

Strathdee Music Club

Scottish Accordion Music Group, Banchory

Upper Deeside Music, Aboyne

Woodend Music Society, Banchory



Traditional

Alford Fiddlers

Banchory Accordion and Music Group

Banchory Pipe Band

Banchory Strathspey & Reel Society

Ballater and District Pipe Band

Bucksburn & District Pipe Band

Buchan Pipe Band

Garioch Fiddlers Strathspey & Reel Society

Gadie Music

Huntly and District Pipe Band

Inverurie Pipe Band

Kintore Pipe Band

Macduff Strathspey & Reel Society

Portlethen District Pipe Band

Scottish Accordion Music Group

South Aberdeenshire Music Centre

Stonehaven Pipe Band

Strathbogie Fiddlers

Strathspey and Reel Society

Tarland Fiddler

Towie Pipe Band

The Royal Scottish Pipe Band Association

The Ythan Fiddler

Turriff Pipe Band

Turriff and District Accordion & Fiddle Club

Music schools/Tuition

Chalmers Mackay Music School, Kintore

Chris Paterson, Guitar tuition

Joanna McCurry, Piano tuition

The Rhythm Box, Kemnay, lessons in various instruments

Robin Thornton, Banchory, lessons in treble clef, acoustic, bass clef

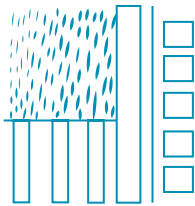
Studios/Makers

ARC Studio

Bob Barrow (Sound Recordist)

Gj Guitars, guitar maker, Kinellar

THEATRE



Theatre Groups and Companies

Auchenblae Drama Group

Blitz Entertainment Ltd., Theatre Company

Break a Leg Theatre School Ltd.

Braemar Pantomime, Braemar

Buzz Theatre Group, Inverurie

Deeside Youth Musical Theatre, Aboyne

Deeside Musical Society, Musical Theatre Company

Dudendance Productions, Theatre Company

Fraserburgh Junior Arts Society, Fraserburgh

Haddo Children's Theatre

KidzAct, Newtonhill, Stonehaven

Midmar Players, Midmar

Mitchell School of Drama, Inverurie

Pyjama Drama, South Aberdeenshire

Spotlight Theatre, Inverurie

Stagecraft Theatre Group, Turriff

Stonehaven Ury Players, Stonehaven

The Northern Rough Riders, Huntly



Film Organisations

Aberdeenshire Film Club

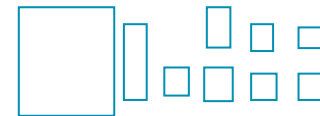
Aboyne Cinema, (Through Film Mobile Scotland)

Ballater Cinema, (Through Film Mobile Scotland)

Craigievar Film Club

Peterhead Cinema, (Through Film Mobile Scotland)

Stonehaven Cinema, (Through Film Mobile Scotland)



NEAT (North East Arts Touring) Venues

Aden Country Park, Mintlaw

Arbuthnott Village Hall

Banff Castle, Banff

Banff Town Hall

Braemar Village Hall

Cullen Town Hall

Deeside CEC, Aboyne

Deveron Arts, Huntly

Dickson Hall, Laurencekirk

Duff House, Banff

Crathes Hall, Crathes

Daviot Village Hall

Dalrymple Hall, Fraserburgh

Finzean Hall, Finzean

Haddo House, Ellon

Inverurie Town Hall

Johnshaven Village Hall, Johnshaven

Kemnay Village Hall, Kemnay

Lonach Hall, Strathdon

Logie Coldstone Village Hall

Lumsden Village Hall

MacRobert Memorial Hall, Tarland

Midmar Village Hall

New Deer Public Hall

New Pitsligo Public Hall

Portsoy Town Hall

Portsoy Church Hall

Portsoy Institute Hall

Scottish Sculpture Workshop,
Lumsden

Tullynessie & Forbes Hall

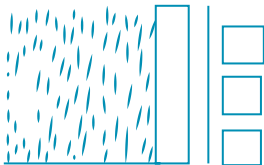
The Salmon Bothy, Portsoy

The Bettridge Centre, Newtonhill

The Wyness Hall, Inverurie

Woodend Barn, Banchory

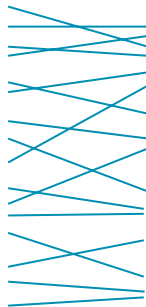
WRITING



Writer's Groups and Centres

Alford Doric Group
Alford Writers Group
Deeside Writers
Grampian Association of Storytellers
Grassic Gibbon Centre (Arbuthnott)
Huntly Writers
Kinmuck Book Club
North East Writers
Oldmeldrum Writers Group
Portlethen Reading Group
Reflexion Writing Workshops
Rosehearty Burns Club

Strichen Burns Club
Turriff Writers Circle
Westhill 50+ Creative Writing Group



Ideas

Aberdeenshire Libraries
Pushing Out the Boat Magazine,
North East Scotland's Magazine of
New Writing
The Philosophy Café, an
independent organisation working
in partnership with Aberdeenshire

Libraries and Aberdeen University
to offer an opportunity to reflect on
contemporary society's unsolved
problems and unanswered questions
in the company of distinguished
lecturers

The Book of Deer, first known at
Deer Abbey, and now held by
Cambridge University, this may be
the oldest surviving manuscript
produced in Scotland; it is certainly
the earliest surviving Gaelic writing
from Scotland



Publishers

Blue Salt Publishing
Cauliay Publishing
Koo Press
Lumphanan Press



Universities, Art Schools and Cultural Research Programmes

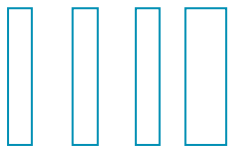
Gray's School of Art, Robert Gordon
University

On The Edge Research programme

dot.rural University of Aberdeen
Research Centre

Rural Life in Digital Britain
(Dr Leanne Townsend, University of
Aberdeen)

HISTORIC PLACES



Prehistoric Sites

Aberdeenshire Council lists many ancient sites across the Shire, with directions and detailed descriptions. They give some idea of the richness of local archaeology and the length of time that people have lived in this part of Europe.

Clava Cairns, Bronze Age site

Henges, 3 sites from the third millennium BCE

Hill Forts and Settlements, 12 sites from different prehistoric periods

Long Cairns and Barrows, 5 sites dating from (c 4,000 - 3,000 BCE)

Round burial cairns, 5 late Neolithic and early Bronze Age sites

Standing Stones, 3 sites from the Bronze Age

Stone Circles, 16 sites, 8 standing and 8 recumbent

Souterrain, an underground cave



Roman Sites

Raedykes Roman camp, Stonehaven, one of a number of Roman military sites in the NE



Pictish Sites

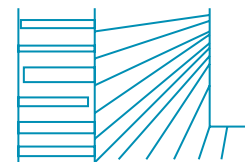
Pictish Symbol Stones, 18 sites from the early Middle Ages, listed by Aberdeenshire Council



Townships, Cottages and Settlements

Auchtavan, a rare survival of a traditional Highland clachan or fermtoun

Fordyce Joiner's Workshop and Visitor Centre



Castles and Fortified Houses

Castle Fraser, Inverurie, (National Trust for Scotland)

Corgarff Castle, Strathdon, (Historic Scotland)

Alford, (National Trust for Scotland)

Craigston Castle, Turriff

Crathes Castle, Crathes, (National Trust for Scotland)

Delgatie Castle, Turriff

Drum Castle, Drumoak (National Trust for Scotland)

Dunnottar Castle, Stonehaven

Fyvie Castle, Turriff, (National Trust for Scotland)

Kildrummy Castle, (Historic Scotland)

Slains Castle, Cruden Bay

Tolquhon Castle, (Historic Scotland)



Grand Homes and Estates

Aden Country Park, A major site in Buchan, home, among other things, to Aberdeenshire Farming Museum, Hareshowe Working Farm, North East Folklore Archive (NEFA), and ARC Recording Studio: owned and managed by Aberdeenshire Council

Balmoral Estates, Ballater

Balmedie Country Park, The park is within part of a dune system that stretches 14 miles from Aberdeen

Banff Castle, Adam House on the site of a medieval castle: now an arts and community centre

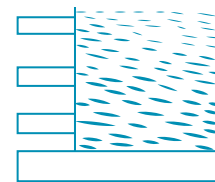
Belabeg Park, Home of the Lonach Highland Games

Cairngorms National Park Authority

Duff House, Banff

Haddo House, (National Trust for Scotland)

Marr Lodge Estate, (National Trust for Scotland)



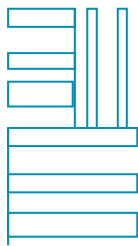
Gardens

Leith Hall Garden & Estate, Huntly (National Trust for Scotland)

Pitmedden Garden, Ellon, (National Trust for Scotland)

Woodend Allotments, Banchory, Opened in 2007 as a community allotment with a summer house and an open air performance space behind Woodend Barn

MUSEUMS



Accredited Museums

Aberdeenshire Farming Museum, Mintlaw, Peterhead

Arbuthnot Museum, Peterhead, Maritime history, Inuit artefacts and temporary exhibitions

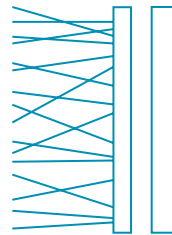
Banchory Museum, Royal Deeside and natural history

Grampian Transport Museum, Alford

Insch Connection, Local history centre in the railway station

Mintlaw Discovery Centre, Aberdeenshire Museums Service HQ

Museum of Scottish Lighthouses, Fraserburgh



Other Museums

Aden Country Park, Mintlaw, Farming Museum

Banff Museum, Banff, one of Scotland's oldest Museums, founded in 1828

Brander Museum, Huntly (Currently closed)

Blairs Museum, Blairs, Catholic history and heritage museum

Deeside Steam and Vintage Club, Banchory

Fordyce Joiner's Workshop, Fordyce

Garlogie Mill Power House, Skene

Loch of Strathbeg Nature Reserve, Fraserburgh

Maud Railway Museum, Maud

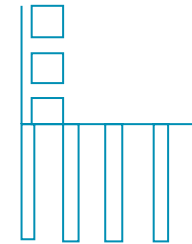
Pitmedden Garden & Museum of Farm Life, Ellon (NTS)

Sandhaven Meal Mill, Fraserburgh

Stonehaven Tolbooth Museum, Stonehaven

Stonehaven Tollbooth Museum

Victoria & Albert Hall, Ballater



Research and Archives

Elphinstone Institute, studies and promotes cultural traditions and language in the North East

NEFA, The North East Folklore Archive, Mintlaw, Peterhead



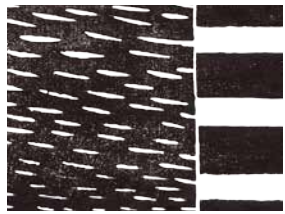
Heritage & Preservation Societies

There are many Heritage Societies in Aberdeenshire whose details can be found on the Council's website.

Banff Preservation and Heritage Society

Crovie Preservation Society

Tarland and Cromar History Group



6

THE ARTISTS

Anne Murray

The Moku Hanga, Japanese woodblock print responds to the idea that a place is made up of both a sense and spirit of place. The marks, colours, patterns and forms of Aberdeenshire are wide and varied. Whether it is a view of ploughed fields seen from Mither Tap, the connection between our heritage and our global impact or the ripples left on the sand at Sanine; all these minute details have been experienced by people who have inhabited the North East of Scotland. The print simplifies the universal language of wind, sun, rain, rivers, roads, fields, architecture, people, communication, connections and how they all work together to make a place.

Anne Murray is a graduate of Grays School of Art and has lived in the North East of Scotland since 1989, when she left home on the West Coast and never returned. She has recently moved to Huntly, Aberdeenshire and enjoys making connections between places and making through walking, drawing, poetry, printing, ceramics and textiles.

www.anne-murray.com

Ray Smith

Ray Smith has been described as one of Scotland's most innovative photographers, with a growing international reputation. His portfolio of work ranges from commercial, advertising and fashion to reportage and portraiture. He has been celebrated in major art gallery exhibitions and has been recognised by the New York Art Directors Association for his commercial advertising work. His career has seen him create an award winning ten page fashion magazine spread featuring Vivienne Westwood designs set at one of his favourite locations, Balmedie Beach. A strong interest in the work of street photographers such as Henri Cartier-Bresson and Josef Koudelka inspired Ray to take his own documentary style photographs depicting life in and around Scotland.

www.raysmithphotography.com

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The essay responds to this brief and is the result of research undertaken between October 2012 and January 2013, including visits to Aberdeenshire, interviews, discussion groups and other meetings over the winter. It was published in draft form in Spring 2013, has since been reviewed, corrected and updated.

I am very grateful to the following people who made time to meet me and help me understand some of the particular character of culture in Aberdeenshire.

Caroline Aston (North East Arts Touring) • David Atherton • Brian Angus

festival)

Robin Baird (Touched by Scotland) • Jennie Biggs • David Blythe • Mary Bourne

Fiona Campbell (Voluntary Arts Scotland) • Stuart B. Campbell • Davy Cattanach • David Clark • Ian Clark • Richard Clark (sound festival)

Anne Douglas (Gray's School of Art • Robert Gordon University) • Fiona Duckett (Watergaw Ceramics)

Anne Doble • Nicholas Dolphin

Vicky Dawson (Yeadon's Bookshop)

Paul Harris (Head of School, Gray's School of Art) • Sarah Hawker (Butterworth Gallery & Royal Deeside and the Cairngorms Destination Management Organisation Ltd) • John Hearne (Sound Festival) • Inverurie Music and Monymusk Arts • Leigh-Anne Hepburn (Design in Action) • Haworth Hodgkinson (Inverurie Music and North East Writers) • Jan Holmes (Touched by Scotland) • Fiona Hope (Lang Byre Gallery) • Mark Hope (Woodend Barn) • Janet Hoper (Haddo Users Group)

Sarah Griffiths (RGU)

Anthony Elliott

Iain Irving (Gray's School of Art and Deveron Arts)

Catrin Jeans

Claudia Zeiske (Deveron Arts)

Clea Wallis • Michelle Ward (Royal Hotel, Stonehaven) • Charlie West (Stonehaven Folk Festival) • Susan Whyte (Woodend Barn) • Roger Williams (Sound Festival and Haddo Festival) • Jason Williamson • Emily Wyndham Gray (Scottish Sculpture Workshop)

Mary Taylor (Strathdee Music) • Leanne Townsend (University of Aberdeen)

Katy Rewston • Marilyn Riggs
Hilary Nicholl

Nuno Sacramento (Scottish Sculpture Workshop) • Mel Shand (Artist and NEAT promoter) • Alison Simpson, Helen Smith (Gray's School of Art & Woodend Barn) • Fiona Soe Paing • Gavin Sutherland (ARC)

David Patullo (Platform 22 Gallery) • Emma Patullo (Platform 22 & North East Open Studios)
Sandy May and Vi May (Buchan Heritage Society)
Marlene Lowe (Buchan Heritage Society)

Gemma Kearney (Research Fellow Design in Action) • Rachel Kennedy • Alexandra Kokol • (Robert Gordon University)

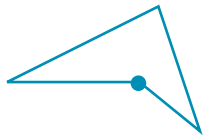
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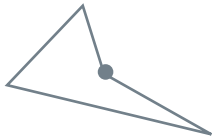
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MAP

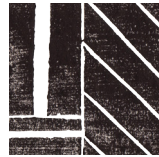


Aberdeenshire Area and Towns



North East of Scotland





Aberdeenshire is an ancient, rich and varied land. It embraces dramatic coastlines and busy harbours, grand mountains and sweeping moorlands, castles and farms and country towns. It is also home to gifted artists, makers and musicians, innovative cultural organisations and lively creative businesses. This book, commissioned by Aberdeenshire Council and Creative Scotland, is a portrait of our culture – past and present– as seen from a distance by François Matarasso, researcher and an Honorary Professor at Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen.

His long essay offers a thoughtful account not only of Aberdeenshire’s creative resources but of the relationship between land, people and culture, and suggests some ways in which our distinctive place might be developed. Researched during 2012 and 2013, the book is a snapshot of its time. The lists of organisations in the second part give some idea of the strength and diversity of our cultural life, but things will already have changed and grown. Our culture is living and there’s always something new to discover.