

WHITHORN TRUST : IRON AGE ROUNDHOUSE RECONSTRUCTION

Statement of Public Benefit

The project

The Trust wishes to carry out a full-scale experimental reconstruction of an Iron Age roundhouse, surrounded by a kitchen garden growing period crops, to interpret for the public the groundbreaking excavation of an Iron Age settlement near Whithorn. This excavation in 2015 has provided the clearest evidence of roundhouse construction yet found, which will change our understanding of the Iron Age in South West Scotland. From it, we shall be using evidence about living and work space, the floors, internal furnishings, hearths and walls which have been preserved. The building will be reconstructed on the Whithorn Trust site, which is accessible to the public, whereas the original is in a remote spot with problematic access. We shall simultaneously film the process of construction, to provide content for a built heritage smartphone app, and an installation documenting craft skills from the Iron Age to the modern day. The roundhouse will form a legacy for the Whithorn Trust and the community : it will be an outdoor classroom, craft exhibition and participation space, unusual space hire for weddings and other events, stage for re-enactment, tours and community events, and enable exploration of historic diet and crops, with communal cooking area.

The organisation

The Whithorn Trust is a company limited by guarantee, with charitable status. It has a board of 9 Trustees and Company Secretary, who meet monthly, with smaller ad hoc groups meeting more regularly. Trustees represent a variety of local interest groups, including the local authority as main funder, but also business interests, community groups and the Trust's volunteers. It has one permanent Development Manager, and seasonally, a supervisor, museum attendant, three front of house staff and part time chefs. It has a growing volunteer group of up to 50 people. The Trust receives an annual grant from Dumfries and Galloway Council, which has been reduced in recent years, and has an annual agreement with Historic Scotland to manage the museum of early medieval carved stones. In 2014, the Trust carried out an HLF-funded Transition Project, to look at organisational resilience and new directions in which it might become sustainable and less dependent on Council funding. Since then, it has increased earned income and project income and decreased costs, but the process of developing the Trust site and public profile is a continuing one, as we seek to broaden the attraction of the interpretation and collection, and the activities available to visitors. The audited accounts to April 2014 show income of [REDACTED]

The roundhouse

Discovered during the digging of drainage on the Monreith estate, a few miles from Whithorn, the remains of what may be a complex of at least eight timber roundhouses have been partially excavated by archaeologists, who, in 2015, found the floors, internal furnishings, hearths and walls surviving in remarkably good condition thanks to the wetland conditions. A date of c.460BC was extracted from dendrochronology data in the earlier trial trench. Galloway has been the centre of crannog investigations since the 19th Century, contributing much to the foundation of studies in this field; indeed, this site on the land of the Maxwell family was known to Sir Herbert Maxwell, one of the most active antiquarians of his time. Recent research has established that this settlement, owing to its size and location beside a loch, is the first of its kind in Scotland and most closely resembles Glastonbury lake village, excavated in the 19th Century, when archaeology was in its infancy. This is an opportunity to celebrate the centrality and the contribution of Galloway to Iron Age studies.

The Black Loch site is giving archaeologists a chance to employ 21st Century techniques on an excavation of Iron Age buildings, yielding a uniquely clear view of the nature of Iron Age settlement in SW Scotland, and allows us to recreate the arrangement of living and working space in a 2500-year-old house in a way that has never been possible before. Details of woven willow flooring, vegetable matting, alder sill beams and oak posts were all exceptionally preserved by boggy ground conditions, so that dendrochronology is likely to allow outstandingly accurate dating.

As farm drainage continues, however, the continuing preservation of the details of the construction is not guaranteed. Owing to this urgency and to the outstanding results in 2015, which included an extremely rare ceramic pot of this period found in SW Scotland, previously adjudged to be aceramic, there is support from Historic Scotland for further excavation 2016, possibly with a focus on the perimeter of the building and settlement, which remain to be discovered, as do details of the entrance and surrounding palisade. Our public involvement project will investigate and interpret this important new insight into Iron Age construction.

Integral to the project is the creation of a film/ sound installation linked with a smartphone app : the first focusses on "Whithorn at work" and its craft skills over 2,500 years, and the app on guiding the visitor round and through the built heritage of Whithorn. As far back as 731AD, Whithorn is singled out for its unusual building technology - its early church's stone, white walls contrasted by Bede with native wooden constructions- and indeed the town is named after Candida Casa. The roundhouse construction allows us to explore Bede's famous contrast between native and imported construction : using film of our reconstruction, as well as documentary and dramatised sequences, the app will explore the significant milestones in Whithorn's history through its buildings, guiding the visitor to different points in the outdoor site, which will present changing construction technology from the Iron Age through early Christian and High Mediaeval, right to the Whithorn Outstanding Georgian Conservation Area, built over mediaeval foundations. Our video installation will use filmed archaeological evidence and reconstruction showing construction craft skills, and contrast this with the final era of manual skills in the mid 1900's through archive recordings and photographs from Whithorn, ending with modern day traditional craftworkers and mechanisation in the 21st Century. Three millennia of house building and manual skill will therefore be celebrated on a site which has famously been named after a building, with the completion of the roundhouse.

Need for the project

Since 2013/4, the Whithorn Trust has sought ways of generating more income streams, in the face of reducing local authority funding for its core costs, so that it can continue interpreting and maintaining the important early Christian site for which Whithorn is known. To be sustainable, it must increase visitor numbers through a more vibrant visitor experience, increase volunteering, including new Board members, and find connections with contemporary markets in the digital age : this project is designed to achieve these goals.

The Trust has increased the variety of people who become involved, and their age range and this is the moment to capitalise on the goodwill of its volunteers, both to overcome barriers with the local community and to increase its own organisational resilience, through volunteer membership of the Board and providing a reservoir of talent in the future. The Trust believes that a failure to progress would do damage to the budding relations between Whithorn and the town : a venue for multiple uses will place heritage at the centre of life and economy in Whithorn.

The Transition Project of 2014 recommended live excavation, requested in visitor surveys and activities and environments which immerse the visitor in historic cultures. Therefore the opportunity is ripe for the Trust to investigate Iron Age craft skills and cuisine, to explore links between culture and the natural environment, and to provide a venue which embodies those values and a place to foster and exhibit those skills. The Trust's existing visitor profile consists predominantly of retired people, often already members of heritage organisations : we wish to appeal to a broader family market through reconstruction buildings and smarter technology. This unique new venue opens up possibilities for the Trust to become a regional draw, with imaginative guided tours, greater involvement by schools, and seasonal events

The Whithorn Trust would be strengthened, by progressing further in its pursuit of sustainability goals set during its Transition Project. These included live excavation and more dynamic activities on the site as key to attracting more visitors. The reconstruction will allow the reinvigoration of the Whithorn Trust's visitor offering, new marketing opportunities and provide exciting activities during

the high summer season. The corps of volunteers will have taken ownership of the project, supporting its continuing maintenance and development; their membership of the Whithorn Trust board will introduce new hands-on Trustees, and assist in addressing succession planning.