

# Honest Truth

A new exhibition and monument, na Dorsan, marks the centenary of the resettlement of Galson township on the Isle of Lewis. Agnes Rennie, of Urras Oighreachd Ghabhsainn (Galson Estate Trust), tells Ross Crae about how they're celebrating community spirit and determination.



## How important is the exhibition?

If we were going to do a centenary event, then we should also remember why there had been a need for the land settlement in the first place. Galson had been cleared in the mid-19th Century, and there were land raids in the late 1880s. The Land Settlement Act of 1919 then led in due course to Galson Farm, as it had become, being broken up and turned into crofts. So you have clearance, land raids, then resettlement, and then the very positive bit of the jigsaw is that, in 2007, the entire estate of which Galson village is just one of 22, came into community ownership. These four milestones are being commemorated by the exhibition. Learning from that shared history makes us all stronger as we look forward to the future.

## Some of the stories of the clearing and raids were fairly violent?

While they were violent and traumatic for those who lived through them in our communities here in Galson and in other villages through the islands, they were the same in other parts of the Highlands and islands as well. The fact that so many of our straths and glens are empty to this day is not because people chose to leave. It's not because they were always the home of wildlife. It's because people were forced out of them and were never able to return.

## How powerful a moment was it when the monument was unveiled?

I've watched it from the first discussions. Every time I go there, there's something really quite emotional sparked. To see how other people who were seeing it for the first time responded made it very worthwhile.

## What is Galson like today?

It still has all the crofts. A lot of them are still tenanted by the same families who originally received them in 1924. Like everywhere else, people move for different reasons, replaced by other families who have moved in. It's a mixed village, but it's definitely not an abandoned village in any way. It's very much part of a thriving community.

## What's in the exhibition?

We hope that the combination of illustrations, photographs and a bit of text in Gaelic and English will enthuse people not just

# Galson monument is the light after dark days of clearances and raids



**Main:** Agnes's grandparents Seonaid Ruairidh 'an Mhàrtainn and Murchadh 'an Bhàin Dòmhnallach. **Inset:** Schoolchildren from Lionel and Sgoil an Taobh Siar at the monument.

coming at this as visitors, but even people born and brought up here. It's concerning, maybe not surprising, that so much of our shared history just gets forgotten. The monument was very much a partnership project and that's always the best kind. There have been storytelling events, and sessions sharing the story for school groups in the community and so on. Urras Oighreachd Ghabhsainn who manage the estate for the community are very much at the centre of a lot of these things that are going on and work alongside other organisations. I also can't forget the many people who have given us stories and photographs that have been included in the exhibition, which is housed in the estate office and will be supported by a new online presence on our website.

## What is your family connection?

Both my sets of grandparents were fortunate to be among those who were allocated crofts in 1924. I have a very strong personal attachment to the village and to the shared story that we have. Both of these crofts are still in our family and long may that continue.

## What was the experience like for you looking back on your family story?

It's emotional to think back, particularly to hear my grandmother's words being replayed through a radio programme in an interview that I did with her back in the 1980s. It's proven to be a very, very precious archived recording because she was recalling what it was like coming to the village for the first time. It doesn't matter how many times I listen to that, I find it very emotional.

The way the village came about, thrived and developed over the years and is now looking forward to hopefully a good future is something quite precious. I've learned a lot about the wider story of the community and taken great pleasure in being able to learn stories and be part of the experience of sharing them.

## Does this project show the power of community?

It would be simply a landscape without the human community. That has been a constant throughout and that has kept the stories alive. It's that community that's made the village and other villages. That collaboration is really what holds all of this together. Community ownership will ensure that we will never ever have to endure what our forefathers had to when landlordism saw the forced eviction of tenants. The law has changed in the meantime as well, but community ownership is an absolutely vital difference and community is the word that makes it work.

*The na Dorsan exhibition runs until March 2025 in South Galson*