WRESTLING WITH SOCIAL VALUE: AN EXAMINATION OF METHODS AND APPROACHES FOR ASSESSING SOCIAL VALUE IN HERITAGE MANAGEMENT AND CONSERVATION

Case Study Report: The Arnol Blackhouse, Lewis
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Full acknowledgement and grateful thanks are given to all the individuals who participated in this study.

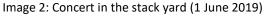Image 1: The 'blackhouse' at number 42 (27 March 2019)

Image 2: Concert in the stack yard (1 June 2019)

Image 3: Living room at number 42 (6 June 2019)

Images 1-3 © Elizabeth Robson

Note on Terminology
The term 'blackhouse' is used throughout this report in line with the current English language name of the site as well as its wider use in technical archaeological frameworks and common day-to-day discourse. It is recognised that, in the past, referring to these vernacular thatched houses as 'blackhouses' had derogatory connotations and the term may still be considered offensive by some people. Two alternative Gaelic language names (*taigh dubh*, black house and *taigh tughaidh*, thatched house) both appear in current Historic Environment Scotland signage and literature, but *taigh tughaidh* has not been adopted more widely in English language literature on the buildings.

Contents

1. Summary

The research informing this site report was conducted primarily over a period of four weeks spent on Lewis (one week in March and three weeks in May/June 2019). This case study used an extended, participatory approach, trialling multiple methods in order to identify the variety of communities and range of social values associated with the site.

This study found that the site is socially and culturally embedded in the community life of *multiple groups*.

- Responses to the site reflect a mixture of connections related to its current form/function, what it once was, and what it represents. These responses depend in part on how people first came to know the site, which has a *generational* dimension.
- The Arnol Blackhouse was a family home within living memory and that *personal connection* is significant to how it is valued.
- The site has an on-going *social presence* in Arnol village life as a place of activity and employment.

The site is intimately connected with the wider *landscape* and with crofting life, which is expressed as an *on-going, future-orientated* practice, and is part of a *living culture*.

- Although the site incorporates multiple buildings, constructed in different periods, *the blackhouse at number 42 is the focus* for most people's attention and expressions of attachment.
- The site provides a *multi-sensory*, interactive experience of 'home' and *contextualises* important aspects of contemporary life on Lewis.
- The site is an *educational resource*, in particular for Gaelic language and culture, and has the potential to benefit greater numbers of young people in this regard, from across Lewis and beyond.
- Working with young people is an opportunity to build *inter-generational understanding* and a potential response to the progressive *loss of living memory* and the impact this could have on community practices, skills and knowledge, as well as future interpretation.

There was a general feeling across respondents that the blackhouse is something *unique*. There are a number of contextual factors that suggest a level of *consultation and sensitivity* is required in managing the site beyond that which might otherwise be considered sufficient for a property in state care. There is a reasonable expectation of greater *transparency and communication* regarding site management, in so far as decisions have the potential to impact either specific individuals, communities or the wider area.

2. Description of Site

Blackhouses: Up until the early 20th century, people across the Western Isles lived in what came to be known as 'blackhouses' (*taigh dubh*, black house or *taigh tughaidh*, thatched house in Gaelic). Constructed from local materials, with stone walls, driftwood roof timbers and a thatched roof, they had their origins in much older building and living practices. Following different forms (the parallel units seen at Arnol are thought to be unique to the Isle of Lewis), they incorporated a byre for livestock, a dwelling and a barn. On Lewis, the move out of blackhouses only really began in the inter-war years, but by the mid-20th century most people were living in the newer style 'white houses', which had cement and lime-mortar walls.

The Site: The Blackhouse site at Arnol, on the West coast of the Isle of Lewis, consists of the houses and immediate surrounds of two crofts (for map see Annex II). At number 42, there is a conserved thatched 'blackhouse', originally constructed around 1875, and the 1960s bungalow that replaced it (now the visitor centre and steward's office). At number 39, there is a ruined blackhouse, tentatively dated to the 1870s, and the 'white house' that replaced it in 1920s. The house at number 42 was one of the last blackhouses to be built without windows or a chimney. It has been conserved as far as possible as it was when it was vacated in 1965, including its contents. The contents of the white house at number 39 are not original but it has been restored and furnished much as it would have been in the late 1950s/early 1960s. These structures are all 'properties in care of the state' managed by Historic Environment Scotland and described in the Statement of Significance. The land surrounding the site is still partly worked and Historic Environment Scotland has the right to cut peat from the banks associated with the croft (used to maintain the fire in number 42, which is lit daily, year round).

The Village: In Arnol, unlike many other places, the remains of blackhouses have not been systematically cleared by the Council. The surrounding landscape therefore still contains many examples of ruined blackhouses alongside more recent housing (see Image 4: ruined blackhouses appear as roofless oblong walls). Some of these ruins are reused for modern purposes, such as storage, and in other instances the stones are taken for use in new constructions.

In 2016, following a prolonged period of community mobilisation and negotiation that began in 2004, the Estate that includes the village of Arnol and the associated crofting and common grazing land was successfully transferred to community ownership of The Barvas Estate Trust

Image 4: 2011 aerial photograph of Arnol village (Canmore Catalogue Number DP 111144. © Crown Copyright: HES)

(Urras Sgìre Oighreachd Bharabhais). The site itself is the property of Scottish Ministers and does not form part of the Estate.

In response to the closure of the local school in Bragar in 2014 and the loss of other public services from the village, the Bragar and Arnol Community Trust was formed. The Trust organises a range of activities to bring community members together and are currently converting the old school building into a hub for local services and tourist facilities. Other community organisations include the Grazings Committee, which manages the common land, and the Comman Eachdraidh (History Society).

3. Research Process

The research informing this site report was conducted primarily over a period of four weeks spent on Lewis (one week in March and three weeks in May/June 2019). The time on Lewis was split between two sites, the Arnol Blackhouse and the Dun Carloway Broch, with the Blackhouse study being the more time intensive of the two. While on Lewis, I visited the Blackhouse three or four times a week, usually for periods of 1-2 hours. In addition to the activities at the Blackhouse site, approximately one week of FTE was spent on preparatory work, liaison and meetings in the preceding months (December to April).

This case study used an extended, participatory approach, trialling multiple methods. The activities carried out were:
- semi-structured interviews (9);
- behavioural mapping (about 1.5 hours during two visits);
- multi-sensory/embodied observation (about 1 hour during two visits);
- public participatory media - images and comments linked to the Arnol Blackhouse as a location on Facebook (34 unique posts) or tagged to #ArnolBlackhouse on Instagram (134 posts);
- arts-based - using historic films, pictures and postcards as inputs to a discussion on the site and the history of Lewis before drawing and writing a 'postcard to the future' (8 primary school pupils); and
- community events (2) - a concert at the site and a coffee morning, attended with the school pupils.

Specific research activities were complemented by general observations and document review.

4. Communities

The West coast of Lewis is dotted with village settlements, that might initially appear to be long-established, geographically-contained communities, but this impression would be misleading. Taking the village of Arnol as just one example, the settlement has moved three times in the last 250-300 years, from the coast up to the main road where it is currently positioned. The policies and hardships that resulted in the relocation of the village also led to the movement of its people, as they were driven to seek work and opportunities elsewhere. This reality, of temporary or more permanent migration, remains part of Island life today; meaning that communities of interest and identity may be widely dispersed and 'resident' communities are more dynamic than might otherwise be assumed.

The site has existed as a family home (until it was taken into State Care in 1965) and as a place of work, education and leisure. ***Communities of interest, identity and geography*** identified during this study were:

Local children	Descendants of present residents
Long-term residents	Past residents (still on Lewis or further afield)
More recent/returning residents	Descendants of historic Arnol or Lewis residents

Members of the family	Croft tenants
School children from the wider area	Gaelic speakers
Volunteers and Stewards (past and present)	Artists, musicians and storytellers
Members of the Estate Trust	Traditional crafters (e.g. thatchers)

This is not necessarily an exhaustive list and individuals may identify with more than one of these groups simultaneously or move between them depending on time and context.

5. Findings

5.1 Connections and Belonging:
- Describing *family relationships and personal connections* formed a prominent part of the research discussions, both defining respondents' relationships and establishing their sense of belonging.
- Due in part to multi-generational croft tenancies, *personal connections are entangled with places.*
- The Arnol Blackhouse was a family home within living memory and the crofts remain associated with the family. The *connection with specific individuals is significant to how the site is valued*, not only by direct family members but also by others with relationships to them.
- *Relationships and practices* (such as participating in crofting activities) appeared to be one way in which non-permanent residents were able to establish and maintain connections to place and active membership of communities.

5.2 Ownership: There were varying opinions expressed on the extent to which there is a sense of communal (as opposed to technical legal/institutional) 'ownership' of the site.
- The Arnol Blackhouse is run as a paid *tourist attraction* and most local respondents indicated that they only visit when taking guests or visitors. That said, many had memories of going to visit with their school, as children, or with their own children.
- The site itself was mostly described *positively*, e.g. "most local residents, natives of the village, are proud to know there is a blackhouse preserved here" and "It's a brilliant resource to have. There's no comparison between a ruin and a roofed building with fire in".
- Several respondents expressed a desire that the village *benefit more directly* from the asset.
- Recent discussions with Historic Environment Scotland over *site management*, in which community proposals had been turned down, may have contributed to present feelings of disconnectedness.

5.3 Authenticity: The Arnol Blackhouse site as a whole showcases how housing on Lewis has adapted and changed, including as it does buildings of different types that were in concurrent use. However, it also seeks to present a blackhouse at a particular moment in the evolution of housing on the island (without windows or enclosed chimney, with the byre in the same structure as the living quarters).
- Several respondents raised questions about the *authenticity of the presentation* of number 42 and the extent to which it is true to a particular period or date. While the house itself is described as "not something created… did exist", there were questions raised about some of the objects within the house. In this context, the authenticity or appropriateness of the object was not only dependent on its age or type but also its provenance. *People are entangled with things,* as well as places, and such connections are remembered even after items officially enter 'a collection'.
- There were concerns that steps taken in conserving the house have led to it *appearing unduly primitive*, i.e. "It was never smoky like the Arnol house, people couldn't have lived like that" and

"They took a lot of decorating, because with the thatch it used to drip, black drops, took a lot to keep them pristine, and they were, pristine".

- These comments mostly related to the blackhouse, although one respondent also questioned the *representativeness* of the white house as it was "never finished - not a completed house".
- There is clearly a balance to be struck between *representing an archetype and reflecting an evolving style* of living that was not standardised. When number 42 was first proposed as a 'croft-museum', there was at least one objection that it was "not a true example of the old 'blackhouse'" style, on account of having only two parallel structures not three (letter to the Editor of the Stornoway Gazette, 20 February 1964, uncatalogued papers of Major N. T. Macleod).

5.4 Blackhouses and 'The Blackhouse':

- Arnol is "a great place for blackhouses". There are numerous examples of ruined blackhouses throughout the village and they form part of the *everyday lived landscape*. By contrast, in the neighbouring village of Bragar, the Council has cleared many of the ruined blackhouses. Here their absence is so noticeable it becomes a form of presence, with a potential project mentioned to map ex-blackhouse locations, while people can still remember them.
- The Arnol Blackhouse site has existed for the last 55 years as a monument/museum. The *process of conserving and curating* the buildings has altered how they are valued when compared to other blackhouses. Responses to the site reflect a mixture of considerations related to its current form/function, what it once was, and what it represents. These responses depend in part on how people first came to know the site, which has a *generational* dimension.
- Although the site incorporates multiple buildings, *the blackhouse at number 42 is the focus* for most people's attention and expressions of attachment. This is true in discussions with local respondents, as well as looking at social media posts, many of which are from tourists but which overwhelmingly focus on the blackhouse and the ruin (e.g. only 9 out of 134 posts on Instagram show any part of the white house).
- There is a general feeling that the blackhouse is something *unique*. Although the white house was occupied until the 1970s, respondents rarely referred specifically to it. This may be in part because, as a non-local, there was an expectation that I would be more interested in the blackhouse, or because white houses remain in use today and are therefore considered less exceptional.

6. Implications

The study found that the site is socially and culturally embedded in the community life of *multiple groups*.

There are a number of contextual factors that suggest a level of *consultation and sensitivity* is required beyond that which might otherwise be considered sufficient for a site in state care:

- The emergence of *community land holding* around the site, and more widely across Lewis, provides an opportunity and a challenge to integrate the site into community-led processes of planning and decision-making.
- The site is entangled within both *communal and family history*. The buildings were family homes within living memory and this demands a degree of sensitivity towards how they are managed and presented, as well as consideration regarding how future changes might still impact on those directly connected to the individuals who lived there.

These factors contribute to a reasonable expectation of greater **transparency and communication** regarding site management, in so far as decisions have the potential to impact either specific individuals, communities or the wider area. In addition:

- As visitor numbers across Lewis continue to grow, there is an opportunity for (and interest in) the site contributing to the future of Arnol as a **financial** as well as a cultural asset.
- Arnol village could also potentially benefit from greater opportunities to utilise the site for **community events**, which would enhance the sense of 'ownership' and integration.

The Arnol Blackhouse is described as a fantastic **educational resource**, in particular for Gaelic language and culture:

- There is **potential to involve greater numbers of young people** (from across Lewis and beyond). Leveraging the site in this way would appear to be in line with existing Historic Environment Scotland approaches, e.g. promotion of free educational visits, provision of learning resources, including in Gaelic, and junior guide schemes. There are of course resourcing and other practical issues to be taken into account.
- As time goes by, there are fewer people alive with direct experiences of blackhouse life and of the more communal style of crofting. Working with young people (e.g. on inter-generational or oral history projects) is one response to the progressive **loss of living memory** and the impact this could have on community practices, skills and knowledge, as well as future interpretation.

The approach taken in this study was to engage with formally organised groups as an initial point of contact and then follow referrals to other individuals and activities. In terms of addressing the recognised **limitations in representation and scope**, complementary research could be conducted with:

- **Arnol residents**: Systematic household sampling or on-site activities involving local residents may identify marginalised or less connected groups who were potentially not reached by this study.
- **Older men**: None of the respondents in this study were men over retirement age. A male researcher or researcher engaged in crofting activities might have more success in reaching this demographic.
- **Migrants**: Exploration of social networks might reveal how/if the site is significant to the identity and operation of communities whose members reside elsewhere for some or most/all of the time.

Annex I: Statement of Social Value

This Statement is an attempt to illustrate the range of values associated with the Arnol Blackhouse site. Values are not static and are liable to change over time. In addition, this Statement is based on a limited number of inputs from individuals who do not claim to speak for or represent the views of their entire community. It should therefore be considered as indicative of the diversity of values for communities with interests in the site, rather than comprehensive or definitive.

Many of the values described below are embedded in the **social context** and are less visible to people from outside the community. However, it is noted that a keen interest is also taken by members of various communities and by traditional crafters in the **skills and practices** used in maintaining the structures.

Understanding and Remembering: Themes of understanding, learning, and memory were entwined throughout the discussions, in part because the site is seen as an educational resource and many people have come to know it through a school visit (either directly or by their children).

- Many people are alive today who were born or brought up in blackhouses and the site is remembered as a functioning family croft, which means it has an immediacy and connection for those individuals to experiences that are still *close to the present and part of living memory*.
- The ability to engage younger generations and children who do not have those personal memories and associations was seen as particularly important. Respondents who had moved or returned to the island also noted that the site provided an opportunity to build *inter-generational understanding.*
- The site is part of *multiple narratives of change* on Lewis, presenting a cautionary lesson that not all 'modern developments' are universally good (as in the white house), but also showing "highlands and islands development has worked".
- While not romanticising the past, there were reflections on the positive aspects of that *communal way of life*. It is because of these associations, as well as the practical affordances of the space, that the site has potential community gathering space (see below).

Crofting Practices: The site is intimately connected with crofting. Unlike the common narratives of decline and threat to the crofting way of life, respondents of all ages mobilised the site to highlight continuity and adaptation within a *future-orientated, on-going practice*.

- The practice of peat-cutting on communal ground for the blackhouse fire is a visible way in which 'the site' maintains a *social presence* in the village. It was commented upon positively that this was done by local staff and not by 'people brought in from Edinburgh'.
- Several of the school children's postcards touched on the *continuities and changes* of crofting life. In spite of lacking personal memories of blackhouse living, they used their experience on site to *contextualise* important aspects of their own lives.

Expression of Living Culture: Following on from both the above points, the site is seen as an opportunity to demonstrate and express a rich local culture, through language, music, knowledge and skills.

- For several respondents the site provides an opportunity to showcase the Gaelic *language*: "Want to make sure every visitor hears a few words and gets to know it exists and is still alive".
- The site was described as the "obvious choice" for a fiddle and accordion community concert, which involved local, returning and visiting musicians.
- More than one person referred to the importance of local knowledge in *maintaining the site* correctly, describing how blackhouses 'breath' and the importance of the fire being lit and remaining open in the middle of the floor as an integral part of the presentation and experience (see below).

Experience of 'Home': The fire in the blackhouse at number 42 is one of the most photographed, commented upon and distinctive aspects of the site. Apart from being essential to maintain the structure, it is key to the overall experience of the site as a 'home': "When we welcome people, feels like saying welcome to our home, and it is a home, not just a monument."

- Respondents reflected on how sitting around a fire provides a common *connection across cultures*: "Universal through so many cultures to have the fire… In terms of a venue for talking, where is better than round a central hearth?"
- The fire was also a point of *interaction* for visitors, who sometimes added peats, and engages multiple senses - the touch of the peat and the heat from the fire, the sight and smell of the smoke.
- Overall, the site, and the blackhouse in particular, offers a *multi-sensory* experience that engages people in embodied ways of knowing and understanding.
- The *smell of peat smoke* was particularly associated with home-coming by some respondents, who mentioned smelling it as they came off the ferry and knowing they were back on Lewis.

- The experience of **on-going activity** in and around the blackhouse (e.g. cutting and burning peats, the animals on the neighbouring croft, the playing of music) counteracts the lack of decoration and absence of personal artefacts to provide a sense of continued life and that it is a real home: "[The Blackhouse was] pretty much as it is now, it's a little bit more sterile, but they've retained the flavour of it as much as everything."
- This experience of home applies to the whitehouse as well, although there it appears to be rooted in a greater degree of **familiarity** with the way of life and the items displayed: "Was really nice to go into the whitehouse and see furniture and things familiar to me from the 1960s. Chair in that house that is in the kitchen [here], a tiny armchair."

Relationships to people: The site has existed as a family home and as a place of work, education and leisure. Although it is not curated as a family museum, these aspects are not entirely distinct.
- Particularly for older people, the blackhouse is not just a house but a particular family's house. The site is interpreted in part through its **connection with those individuals** and it is valued because of and with respect to that connection: "know it as someone's house, makes a difference".
- The site is also connected to the people who have volunteered and worked there, many of whom are Arnol residents. The site therefore continues to play a **role in village life** and to be cared for and presented (whether formally or informally) by those that live alongside it.

Relationships to place: The Blackhouse site is connected to the wider landscape within which is it situated.
- Crofting practice connects individual places within **integrated landscapes** of utility and practice. In this respect, the site's position in the landscape and its relationship with the neighbouring crofts, the common grazings, more distant moorland, and the shore, becomes significant.
- For older people, the site provides an entry point to talk about a way of life that is intimately connected to the **land**, and thereby to the political and economic history of Lewis.
- For children, blackhouse ruins form part of an 'always been there' landscape of play and exploration. They are not necessarily thought of individually as places people lived in or as sites from the past, but are **part of everyday encounters** with a landscape that includes many types of abandoned buildings, which are utilised and repurposed in multiple ways. Visiting 'The Blackhouse' as a museum is a particular type of experience, but (out of hours) the site is also a place for play.
- The site also provides a hook to express deeper **connections to place**: "I see the benefit of my children knowing where they come from and their identity, and the Blackhouse represents that, if I can say that... The architecture is part of my heritage, I didn't appreciate that when I was younger."

Gathering place (potential and emergent): Although respondents indicated that they had not previously thought of the site in this way until prompted by this research process, there are indications that it is in other respects an 'obvious' community gathering space and is connected to past gatherings:
- Reference has already been made above to the associations with communal life and gathering around the fire to talk and tell stories (*ceilidh*, visiting in Gaelic). This aspect of blackhouse living is showcased in the short film *An Tac an Teine* (Beside the Fire), created by local Primary School pupils.
- The community concert, which was held in the stackyard at number 42, saw local people of all ages sitting and talking and, even after the concert was finished, stopping to chat and have a coffee in the shop. Although the site was busy with several tour buses during the concert itself, people were taking the time to connect with what was happening and to talk to the locals and musicians.
- The site already offers a multi-sensory experience, as noted above, and further enabling people to 'be' or 'do' at the site would enhance the already existing social aspects.

Annex II: Map of the Area

Image 5: Map showing the Arnol Blackhouse site, from Canmore (www.canmore.org.uk). © Copyright and database right 2016. All rights reserved. Ordnance Survey licence number 100057073. Black spots indicate records, including No. 42 (to the right of the road, spot on blackhouse) and No. 39 (to the left of the road, spot on whitehouse). Annotated to show scheduled area (approx.) outlined in red.

Annex III: Comparators and References

Population movements, including people moving onto the island from elsewhere, mean that who is considered part of the community is not a simple matter of residency and may vary depending on context. The ***dynamic nature of community membership*** has been explored in other studies, e.g. MacDonald 1997.

Several authors have written about the ***development of blackhouses*** and there is a detailed Historic Scotland Research Report on the Arnol site (Holden & Baker 2004), which includes a lot of background. Mackie's 2006 paper not only describes the structures but also makes the connection between vernacular building styles and wider social changes and policies. This research was based on the village of Bragar and was well known to a number of respondents.

As part of a wider archaeological survey on the North part of Lewis, Poller explored ***attitudes towards blackhouses***. She describes them as "an integrated element of the everyday experiences of the wider landscape" (2012: 54). This mirrors attitudes among younger respondents in this study and to some extent attitudes to blackhouses in general. As is discussed in the report, the Arnol Blackhouse site is considered somewhat differently, but it is equally a part of an evolving present as it is an aspect of the past:

> "For them [community members of Ness], the ruins of these buildings [blackhouses] were part of their contemporary everyday life, not often consciously distinguished as separate places of the past." (ibid: 51-52).

In a recent paper looking at the island of South Uist, Course explores memory, relationships, ruin and absence as aspects of a landscape. Like Poller, Course adopts a **dwelling perspective** to move beyond materiality and explore alternative perspectives and practices on engaging with place. Course argues that even a ruined house is an expression of life and of dwelling in "a landscape in which human dwelling cannot be taken for granted or guaranteed" (2019: 62). This attitude was echoed in discussions I had with respondents on school closures, migration (and return), mapping cleared blackhouses, but also reusing old stones, repurposing buildings, and planning for the future.

This study has also benefitted from works that are not directly addressing the Hebridean context, i.e.:
- May's 2019 paper on **farming practices** in a World Heritage landscape (the Lake District) as a form of future-orientated practice that counteracts 'heritage' narratives of endangerment and decline, which resonated with approaches to crofting on Lewis; and
- Examinations of **housing as heritage**, such as Malpass' examination of the Sea Mills estate in Bristol, in which he argues that "a focus on housing as Heritage [capital H] misses most of what is important about housing" (2009, 213). In the context of this study such critiques highlight the risk of co-opting vernacular housing into formal heritage systems that emphasise material conservation and design integrity over continued engagement by the communities for whom a building is significant and reflection on the cultural processes that created it.

References and Further Reading:
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- May, S. (2019). "Heritage, endangerment and participation: alternative future in the Lake District." *International Journal of Heritage Studies*: 1-16.
- Poller, T. (2012). "Scottish Blackhouses: Archaeological Imaginings in M. Janowski and T. Ingold (eds.) *Imagining Landscapes: Past, Present and Future*. Farnham, Ashgate Publishing Limited.

Links within the text:
- Historic Environment Scotland's Statement of Significance for the Arnol Blackhouse (reviewed 2017): https://www.historicenvironment.scot/archives-and-research/publications/publication/?publicationId=9dc90b35-8d2d-4d69-8555-a86500e56aa7
- The film An Tac an Teine (Beside the Fire): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y61YFE1sD7E (English); and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CK2s-lZCwm0 (Gaelic)