



***Nairn in 2020***

***Brigadoon or a Jewel in the Scottish Crown?***

## **Presentation to the Nairnshire Partnership 28<sup>th</sup> January 2009**

I am grateful for the invitation given at the last Nairnshire Partnership to explain some of the reasons behind my recent submission to the Nairnshire Telegraph. The aim of the article was not to criticise but to stimulate debate on some of the major and perplexing issues confronting Nairn. Whether as a result of deficient structures or possible apathy on the part of the community, I am concerned that there may not be sufficient awareness of the challenges Nairn faces. Whatever the reason, there is only limited local engagement in the debates and decisions which will determine the future of our town.

This Partnership offers an opportunity for dialogue, which I welcome. It is a forum for the sharing of ideas and plans by various stakeholders in the town. But questions have been raised as to whether this group or our various Community Councils provide an adequate opportunity for local people to debate issues that affect the town as a whole. Like most other comparable towns in the region, we need a unified town-wide forum where matters that concern us all may be openly and formally debated, especially in those matters that will determine our future. I therefore understand the call for a single Community Council.

I recently expressed the view that local people felt disenfranchised when it comes to the decision making processes that affect Nairn. Given that the traffic problem, the need for a bypass, the decline of the High Street and the dereliction in the town centre have been sources of discussion and discontent for years, this should come as no surprise to members of the Partnership. Some recent issues serve as vivid examples.

The Bridgemill development: While some development decisions have been pending for years, this proposal seemed to be nodded through so swiftly and with so little opportunity for public discussion that even local Community Councillors were not fully aware of what was being proposed. Serious questions still remain in the minds of local people about the scale and size of this building project and how far it will be compatible with, and complementary to, the riverside location of the site. There ought to have been much more transparency and clarity about the impact of this. While affordable housing is a noble cause, the end result should not be a blot on the landscape.

Secondly, it is a major concern that, despite being flagged up many months ago around this table, the terms of the deal made between the Council and Somerfields may mean that land is now lost to the people of Nairn. If the document transferring the land does not have a fall-back clause and a robust set of conditions, then it supports the view that we have been failed by those who have a duty to protect our interests.

With the closure of the Job Centre, the Court, and the pending move of Planning Dept there is concern that Nairn is losing the ability to determine its own destiny. No doubt the services will not be diminished but to a degree that's not the whole story. It makes it harder and more expensive for Nairn residents to access advice and services. In terms of the local economy, an increasing number of Highland Council staff will now be spending their money in Inverness rather than contributing to the economy of Nairn. Stripping out layers of local decision making and moving staff can hardly be argued as demonstrating support for Nairn.

New developments within the town are another topic for debate. There is an alarming contrast between the almost complete lack of action on addressing the existing derelict sites in the heart of Nairn, with the zeal shown by developers to build on current open space and common land. The developers' plans to exceed

the agreed limits on the number and density of the proposed housing at Sandown have already been flagged up by concerned residents. In fact, each of the five<sup>1</sup> development schemes currently in prospect for Nairn appear to be pursued independently and without coordination over issues of infrastructure, common services, or local impact. The developers do not talk to each other. Public consultation is patchy. Local-authority representatives have been conspicuous by their absence at open public forums<sup>2</sup>. And there is no opportunity for the public to debate the cumulative impact of these plans on the future shape of the town.

It is thus hardly surprising if some residents begin to wonder if they can rely on their elected representatives to act in their best interests. Hence the phrase I used in the Nairnshire Telegraph - "Can we have our town back please?" The reality is that we haven't got to that stage – yet! But I think it should be noted by everyone around this table that things are not what they could be or should be. None of us can afford to dismiss the concerns of local people.

With this background we can now begin to direct our thoughts more specifically to tourism? And it is within this context that the new Visit Nairn Tourism Association has concern about the future of the town. We all recognise that sensible, effectively-planned and coordinated development is crucial to the future of Nairn as a viable, prosperous and thriving town. So together, we need to address some fundamental questions. Has consideration been given to the type of town we want Nairn to be? If the proposed developments within the Local Plan go ahead, what studies have been done to examine the impact on tourism? How can we work with developers to ensure that they retain the essential character of the town and even enhance it?

Given this context, I would like to move our focus to Nairn as a future tourist destination. Can I take you forward 11 years to the year 2020? I'd like you to imagine a visitor to the Highlands travelling along the new dual carriageway from Inverness to Nairn. This visitor to the Highlands has recently read an online blog and he wonders if Nairn should be on his itinerary.

### **The blog was titled: Brigadoon or a jewel in the Highland crown?**

"It has been a long time coming, and some thought it would never happen, but the Nairn bypass finally opened in May 2020. Journey times between Inverness and Aberdeen have been dramatically reduced, some say by up to 30 minutes now that the Nairn bottleneck can be avoided. Before the bypass, the sheer volume of traffic along with poorly phased lights regularly brought traffic to a standstill. Residents were becoming increasingly wearied by the steady rumble of heavy goods vehicles and the mass of frustrated holiday-makers attempting to get through the town, quite unimpressed by the dilapidated and crumbling ruins of a decaying town centre. None of them knew that within a 100yds was an award-winning sandy beach with one of the most spectacular views in the Highlands, or that Nairn was home to two championship golf courses

But today, as you speed out of Inverness, through the growing new town of Tornagrain, and approach the Gollanfield interchange you are faced with a number of choices. Thankfully the road signs at this point on

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<sup>1</sup> The current five schemes are Cawdor (Delnies), Deveron (Sandown), Scotia (S Nairn), Bridgemill (Albyn/Jack), Pettifer (Sainsburys); and perhaps the expansion of Lochloy/Kingsteps is a sixth?

<sup>2</sup> Prince's Trust for the Built Environment.

the road do include signs for Nairn. It's hard to imagine 15 years ago, that signs from the airport failed to give directions to the Highland's second largest town, just 7 miles away. But now there are several other signs at the interchange. Apart from the Speyside Whisky Trail there is also a sign for the newly opened Virgin Galactic – the world's first spaceline terminal. So it's a choice of a dram or two on the banks of the Spey – or a quick spin around the globe with Richard Branson – or might it be worth a brief detour through Nairn to find out whatever became of the town - once known as "The Brighton of the North"?

Everyone knows that just over 10 years ago Nairn was faced with some very tough choices. At the time, the whole nation was in the grip of recession and the future looked bleak. Bold new plans for the redevelopment of the town centre had, for years, lurched from one crisis to another and councillors despaired of ever realising their vision for the town. In addition, with aggressive tourism marketing initiatives in Inverness, Loch Ness, Aviemore and Speyside, Nairn was in danger of being pushed off the map altogether. And the bypass made it easier for the town to be, well, bypassed! With such dismal prospects there was a danger that the people of Nairn would simply put up the shutters. They were becoming weary and fearful for the future, increasingly worried that they no longer had a say in what happened in the town. They began to wonder if Nairn had a future. Despite the well-intentioned efforts of local councillors, there seemed to be no solution to the eyesore of the Regal Cinema, Rosebank Church or the old bus station. It seemed as if the High St would slip into further decline, especially after the closure of Woolworths. Could this be the final nail in the High St coffin? And to make matters worse, there was a growing feeling that, as far as Highland Council was concerned, Nairn was no longer on their radar. Highland Council had in fact been accused of being Invercentric<sup>3</sup>. True or not, it was a charge that resonated with local people. In addition, they were concerned about numerous ad hoc planning developments that seemed to be taking place over their heads and they began to feel excluded from the decision making processes. It did not matter if these perceptions were real or imagined, or even unjustified, the end result was that people were inclined simply to disengage and lose hope for the future.

At that time however, John Swinney MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Finance & Sustainable Growth said: "Scotland's town and city centres are the beating heart of our economy. The businesses on high streets up and down Scotland are crucial drivers that can help keep our economy moving – particularly at a time when Scotland is feeling the effects of the global downturn."<sup>4</sup>

So whatever appeared to be happening locally, there was officially a very clear vision for Scotland's towns and city centres. But in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century Nairn had been in danger of failing to recognise the challenges in the first place – or if they did, they felt powerless to do anything about it. What the town needed was new vision. There had been some ambitious proposals for Nairn. Some were good and one or two others were patently ridiculous. But that didn't matter. What was important that people began to discuss the issues and started to dream again about the possibility of a better future.

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<sup>3</sup> Nairnshire Telegraph editorial of 2 December.

<sup>4</sup> Vital and Vibrant Small Towns Conference, Stirling University, Nov 08

### Some ideas proposed at the time were as follows:

- 1) There was concern that Inverness exerts a major influence on commerce and employment within Nairnshire and initiatives were required to strengthen local trade and services. Nairn was attempting to define its role as a sustainable and complementary centre in the sub-region. Prospects depended on reinforcing the town's subsidiary functions and competitiveness. The Council<sup>5</sup> recognised the need for vigorous promotion of retailing and business opportunities; together with tourist and leisure assets; the development of rail transportation and environmental management offered scope for broadening locally based jobs.
- 2) Against the back-drop of economic decline, family holidays within UK, and outdoor activity and recreation, increased in appeal. Nairn had been famous as a beach resort and proposals were made to improve facilities along the beach-front with more activities for children; sheltered seating areas with small cafes and toilet facilities.
- 3) There was recognition that there needed to be a co-ordinated approach between tourism, businesses and planning interests. At the time development seemed to be happening without a general plan in mind, which if it continued, would restrict tourist development interests. These had to be integrated with a plan for business. It was seen as important to have an overall plan to work to - not one of generic principles; but one that provides details and is ultimately proactive for development projects that support tourism and business, rather than reactive to residential developments.
- 4) The fledgling Visit Nairn Tourism Association put forward bold new plans for re-branding Nairn as a tourist destination. They recognised that the time had come for a new coalition of tourism related businesses, retailing and the local council. New and exciting marketing initiatives were seen to be crucial to Nairn's future.
- 5) The need was recognised for a comprehensive online web portal that promoted Nairn as a unique Highland destination. Developing [www.visitnairn.com](http://www.visitnairn.com) and [www.nairnscotland.co.uk](http://www.nairnscotland.co.uk) were central to the success of any tourism marketing programme. It would be important to feature all that Nairn had to offer as a destination along with nearby places to visit. Online booking had to be a central feature with a last-minute accommodation finder.
- 6) As tourists were increasingly travelling with mobile phones there was a need to develop the existing mobile phone site ([www.nairn.mobi](http://www.nairn.mobi)) which already featured local accommodation and restaurants.
- 7) The creation of an online photo library was proposed using the internationally recognised service offered by Flickr. By featuring quality, atmospheric shots the idea was to develop a Nairn brand that got people talking online about Nairn. Those coming to the Highlands would begin to perceive Nairn as an iconic Highlands destination.
- 8) There was a firm proposal from within Highland Council to promote and enhance tourist opportunities based on marine activities and historical heritage.
- 9) There was a proposal that Nairn become the first Highland Transition Town, ie. one that seeks to tackle the issues of climate change and oil dependence – by growing more of their own food; generating their own energy; creating a wider range of jobs close to home, finding ways to get to 'zero waste'. That way people believed they'd get more out of living here — and help the planet at the same time.

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<sup>5</sup> Proposals that include the word "Council" are proposals originally specified in the Nairn Local Plan of 2000 and due for completion by the year 2008

- 10) Linked to the above was a proposal to provide low-cost electric mini-bus transport linking Parkdean Caravan Park, the Harbour, the High St, the Railway Station, Hospital and Bus Station. Making it easy for people to get around was crucial in developing a vibrant town centre.
- 11) Suggestions were made to consider adding leisure facilities around the harbour, and have a focal point for tourists to stop, park, and be informed about things to do around Nairn.
- 12) The High Street needed to be more pedestrian friendly so that visitors could more easily browse the shops. The development on the Brae had not delivered the expected benefits and it was proposed that pavements on one side of the High St have a covered walkway to give all-weather protection.
- 13) It was suggested that the Council promote, in partnership with the agencies, landowners and interests in adjoining areas, a tourist heritage trail linking the following main heritage sites: Cawdor Castle; Rait Castle; Kilravock Castle. This should embrace opportunities identified in the Nairn Access to Archaeology project<sup>6</sup>.
- 14) One local resident<sup>7</sup> proposed the complete refurbishment and upgrading of the entire promenade and links from the baths to the harbour. Resurfacing the paths, installing lighting, new covered picnic tables, new seating, homogenised signage and refuse areas, well tended grassy areas right down to the dunes and proper access for the less able.
- 15) Another idea was the creation of a miniature steam railway running along the Links between the harbour and the new swimming pool.
- 16) The Council had agreed to promote the development of cycle routes linking the outlying communities with Nairn and adjoining areas.
- 17) The Council supported the development of a multi-use path network in and around Nairn and had a goal to develop access opportunities for informal recreation in connection with town expansion and other main uses.
- 18) Close to the harbour a dolphin discovery centre was proposed. Such a centre would have strong links with local schools and help locals and visitors make a more meaningful connection to ecological issues and care for the environment.
- 19) The Council had agreed to encourage the Forest Authority and landowners to improve public access and facilities to the major forest areas in Nairnshire. These included Leiken Forest, Kilravock, The Ord and Assich Forest.
- 20) Subject to availability, the Council had agreed the goal of encouraging the conversion/restoration of historic buildings of townscape value. These included: The Courthouse; Viewfield House; Rosebank church and the Highland Hotel. Potential uses included a major cultural/visitor centre particularly where this would strengthen links between the town centre and seafront.
- 21) It was suggested that Rosebank Church be bought by the town to house a Highland Art Gallery with provision for craft and artist workshops where visitors could see crafts being made.
- 22) Anticipating the new Sainsbury's on the edge of town there was concern about the effects on the High St. Ambitious proposals were made for the redevelopment of the town centre. The Nairn Festival Theatre on the old supermarket site, linked to the new Highland Art Gallery could see Nairn become a Mecca for Scottish arts with year-round events and exhibitions and be a home for the hugely successful Book & Arts Festival and the International Jazz Festival. The complex would also

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<sup>6</sup> <http://her.highland.gov.uk/SingleResult.aspx?uid=%27THG23%27>

<sup>7</sup> David Brown in the Nairnshire Telegraph Dec 23<sup>rd</sup> 2008

house a heritage centre with taster experiences featuring Culloden and Fort George. A genealogy centre would assist help visitors to discover their roots.

- 23) Many were keen to see the Ballerina Ballroom renovated to become the home of an annual Cinema of Dreams Film Festival and the programme expanded to run a number of weeks each year. The Ballroom would have space to house an exhibition featuring Charlie Chaplin and a theatre showing silent movies.
- 24) The Council recognised golf courses east and west of the town, the seafront/links, harbour and tourist facilities as major assets and had agreed to encourage upgrading/enhancement of these facilities and proper integration of essential services and coastal protection.
- 25) It was proposed that local retailers be supported in the development of their businesses, with emphasis given to those prepared to offer catering using local produce or wishing to set up small specialist shops selling Highland crafts and produce. Retailers recognised that they could actually compete with new supermarkets by working together on developing a new retailing model for the High St and by offering goods and services, and a visitor experience, not available anywhere else.
- 26) With increasing awareness of the importance of nature and the environment, there was enthusiasm for the development of Nairn as an eco-tourism destination to include the upgrading of the river walk to Cawdor with bird-watching and wildlife observation areas.
- 27) Similarly, plans were aired for improved access to the Culbin Forest with better walkways, cycle routes and facilities for bird-watching
- 28) Local residents were keen to see the Nairnia winter parade become a week-long festival with specially constructed tableau's and a lighting spectacular in the Culbin Forest.
- 29) While tourism was seen as important to Nairn, it was suggested that to promote skills and diversify economic and employment opportunities, the town also establish a technology innovation centre on the edge of town. If Lossiemouth could be the world centre for space tourism, Nairn could offer facilities for technology-based start-up businesses where common resources could be shared.
- 30) There was a call to renovate and re-open the original Visitor Information Centre on King St as a small visitor centre with café and Highland craft shop. The VIC would be linked to every accommodation provider via the internet. Tourists would be assisted to find accommodation and be given full details of interesting places to visit within the town as well as further a field.
- 31) A campaign had been mounted to retain the historic Victorian police building. Its loss would have diminished Nairn's built heritage.
- 32) It was recognised that key to any new development within Nairn would be a commitment to upgrading the appearance of the High St. The Council was urged to engage with Nairn businesses, developers and property owners to deliver a joined-up vision for the town. No longer should property owners sit on their hands while buildings crumbled; no longer should developers set the agenda for change. The expectation was that a new memorandum of understanding would ensure that all stakeholders worked together for the good of the town. Planners would no longer be besieged by developers; developers knew what they had to do within the strategic plan to have the proposals speeded through the planning process. Every developer knew they had to contribute to improving the public realm<sup>8</sup>. Businesses gained new confidence as they began to feel they had a future and sought the investment they needed to expand.

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<sup>8</sup> Geographical definition: 'PUBLIC REALM' incorporates all areas to which the public has open access. For example; if a private area of land is spoiling the visual amenity of an area; it could be considered as a 'public realm issue' and be dealt with by the Council.

So given this back-drop, whatever became of Nairn? If, in the year 2020, you were to leave the new A96 and take a detour through the town, what would you find? Were any of these bold ideas embraced or did the shutters go up? Over a century ago, Dr Grigor brought new life and vigour to Nairn. Could it be that somewhere in the town of 2020, you will find a plaque honouring those brave councillors who helped carve out a bright new future for Nairn? Did they meet head-on those who said it couldn't be done? Or did Nairn end up as another Brigadoon that faded for a hundred years – bypassed because no one remembered it was there? Or did it indeed rise to embrace the future and become the premier tourist destination on the Moray Firth and a bright jewel in the crown of the Scottish Highlands? Virgin Galactic beckons but I invite you to take the first exit on the left to find out whatever became of Nairn.

**Proposal:**

As you know the newly established Visit Nairn Tourism Association is becoming increasingly active. We recognise the importance of tourism to Nairn's economy and future. As you are aware, national and regional tourism strategies exist and that both those plans, and our own local assessment of priorities, require the elaboration of a local Tourism Strategy for Nairn (to which we would want all stakeholders, public and private sector, to sign up).

Such a strategy would: a) help to mobilise and shape marketing efforts and other activity by tourism enterprises in the town; b) provide a basis for agreeing priorities with the local council and for bidding for funds. c) help in reaching decisions on the shape and direction of wider plans for the development and growth of Nairn as a town with diverse and good quality facilities and a distinctive tourist offer.

As a group we would be willing to take on the task of producing, for consultation by interested parties including the local ward councillors, the first draft of such a strategy document.

**Is that something the Partnership would like us to pursue on their behalf?**

Iain Fairweather

Visit Nairn Tourism Association

January 2009

With appreciation to Brian Stewart for his input and advice along with numerous other concerned residents whose ideas and views contributed to and sparked-off ideas contained in this paper.