Supporting and celebrating the traditional art of storytelling and the diverse network of storytellers across Scotland today

Scotland's network of traditional music organisations - putting traditional music at the heart of Scotland's culture

Celebrating the diversity of traditional dance and other related traditional and social dance forms in Scotland

A living flow of song, music, dance, story and wordplay
Space for conviviality and collective energy open to all
Creative practice inspired by shared memory and experience
A wellspring for community identities and personal growth
TRADITIONAL ARTS AND SENSE OF PLACE
REALISING CREATIVE POTENTIAL

This Autumn's issue of Blethers introduces a new and ambitious initiative from TRACS: The People's Parish. This is a framework for working with communities to discover and rediscover a 'sense of place,' to dig into the cultural memory and find the resources with which it can be expressed creatively. As Patrick Geddes saw it, 'each place has a true personality.' Inspired by this theme, we also highlight some wonderful projects underpinned by the philosophies of cultural equity, cultural ecology and place-based learning.

We champion Local Voices, an organisation founded by ethnologists Chris Wright and Steve Byrne. Local Voices work with a range of different social groups in communities across the country to collectively explore, document and promote aspects of local cultural language and culture to encourage people to 'sing their own songs again.' They have recently launched a new website and will be working together with local practitioners to support Gifting Every Child - a collaborative and multilingual project through which everyone living in Scotland can tap into our rich creative culture.

We also highlight Fuaran, a recently completed resource from Féisean nan Gàidheal. This project worked with a new generation of Gaelic speakers and singers to engage in research and collection of Gaelic songs in their local area.

The Shieling Project in Glen Strathfarrar is an environmental educational project inspired by the heritage, landscapes and traditional culture of Highland Scotland, working with teachers and young people to explore the natural and cultural heritage of shieling life and its significance today. In this context, songs, stories and traditional skills are all ways to engage body, heart and mind in a relationship with the landscape that is more than intellectual. Lastly, Sensing Place in Dumfries and Galloway is a new project that looks to harness the power of storytelling and archive film to explore new ways to access local creativity.

While we focus on the microcosm of local cultural diversity, we don't forget our global connectedness. Storyteller Claire Druett reflects here on her visit to the Federation of European Storytellers' annual conference (FEST) in Paris, which took place weeks before the Brexit vote. In the current climate, making connections with our European friends is more important than ever. This theme is picked up in the Scottish International Storytelling Festival with a programme of events exploring our international connections. This year's 'Festival of Dreams' will see a celebration of live storytelling, oral traditions and cultural diversity, with a focus on the magical stories of Latin America.

Mairi McFadyen
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ENHANCED BY OUR DIVERSITY, CONNECTED BY OUR HUMANITY

Scotland's history and heritage belongs to all of Scotland's people. Ahead of 2017's Year of History, Heritage and Archaeology, TRACS and BEMIS jointly host a St. Andrew's Day conference exploring how we might realise the creative potential of our diverse cultural heritage in local communities across Scotland.

Modern Scotland has been shaped by millennia of global influence. Part of Scotland has always been - and will be - African, South Asian, Middle and Far Eastern, European and all the diversity of culture, language, religion and beliefs inherent around the globe. In order to foster social and cultural equality, every citizen of Scotland should know the broader story of Scotland's story and role in the world.

It is vitally important to encourage a sense of equal ownership in our national heritage and historic environment, including greater recognition of the diverse intangible cultural heritage (ICH) of local communities. From language, custom and belief to music and song, our discussions explore the unique local expressions of cultural heritage and their global connections, simultaneously universal and particular in character.

We look forward to how we might realise this creative potential, fostering good relationships at a community level and promoting a dynamic, inclusive Scottish national identity for the future.

Wednesday 30th November
Scottish Storytelling Centre
10am I Free but ticketed
The theme for this year’s Scottish International Storytelling Festival is the 'Festival of Dreams.' In addition to the Festival on Tour, this year sees a nationwide local festival campaign and national action celebrating the world changing power of dreams.

Stories are at the core of how we identify and express ourselves, interpret and shape our worlds, both real and imaginary. Storytelling helps us connect - to each other, to our past, to our place, to our world - and together we are empowered by our connections. Dreaming is our birthright: everyone has this capacity. Too often, however, we’re persuaded to believe our voices don’t count or that the future is determined by a powerful few. All of us together can expand the possible by telling, listening to and inventing new stories.

Dare To Dream is part-inspired by the #DareToImagine campaign in 2015, sponsored by the people-powered U.S. Department of Arts and Culture:

"In these times, social imagination is a radical act, restoring personal and collective agency, shifting dominant narratives, and affirming that all of us make the future. When we have the audacity to dream in public, when we begin to unleash imagination and turn it into action, we can move the world."
- U.S. Department of Arts and Culture

Dare To Dream reaches for some big themes: active citizenship, heritage, sustainability, creative placemaking, health and recovery, community change and transformation. The festival has worked with the Scottish Recovery Network, the International Futures Forum, research and design collective Lateral North, the US Department of Arts & Culture and the Scottish Storytelling Forum to create simple resources for use by schools and communities.

This includes an ‘ABC of Local Distinctiveness’ - a simple tool created to inspire people and communities to discover and re-discover whatever is distinctive about a place: rivers and landmarks, plants and animals, buildings, customs, dialects, celebrations, names, recipes, history, myths, legends, story and song. It also includes a wonderful ‘Pedagogy of Dreams’ created by storyteller Beth Cross - a guide for teachers and youth group leaders to enable children to explore the bridge between the inner and outer world that stories offer.

"Imagination is the power to dream something different - for ourselves, our communities, our planet. That what this year's Dreamfest is all about: daring to trust in our dreams and together make them real." - Donald Smith

From 1st September to the 30th November 2016, The Scottish International Storytelling Festival invites you all as creative citizens to discover the stories of the past and to dream the stories of the future.

Imagine the best possible future. What stories would you tell to the world today, from the future of your dreams?

Dè na sgeulachdan a dh’ innseadh tu don t-saoghal an-diugh, bho d’ aislingean mun àm ri teadh?

Whit stories wid ye aye tak wi ye, an whit wid ye leave ahint?
Local Voices is an organisation founded in early 2013 by ethnologists Steve Byrne and Chris Wright. Its mission is to help communities across Scotland identify, collect and engage with their local heritage. They work with a range of different social groups in communities across the country to collectively explore, document and promote aspects of local language, dialect, song, story, music and memory, with a focus on revitalising those elements of local heritage and culture which are at risk of being lost or which are currently under-acknowledged.

Chris and Steve also provide or facilitate access to resources, expertise, training and mentoring for local communities to gain confidence in exploring their own memories and traditional culture on an ongoing basis. Projects aim to encourage interaction between older and younger generations to promote shared community identity, a sense of place, and an awareness of the value of the local in the globalised age.

At the heart of their work is the belief that the every voice deserves to be heard and that individuals and communities are strengthened and empowered by sharing their life stories, participating in their traditions and learning about their local culture. In the age of globalised mass media, they are committed to enabling communities to find their own voice and heritage and be able to share it confidently with the rest of the world.

Between them, Steve and Chris have a wealth of experience in ethnography, oral history and folklore fieldwork, as well as related aspects of local and national cultural policy involving traditional arts and culture. They have worked on both large-scale heritage projects involving digital archives of national importance, as well as small locally-focused projects.

As a precursor to the formation of Local Voices, Steve and Chris partnered with local authorities in their respective hometowns of Arbroath and Dundee to carry out school workshops. Working with primary children in a number of schools, they discovered and re-introduced some of the local songs and singers that can be heard in archives of traditional music, including the Kist O Riches/Tobar an Dualchais online archive (http://www.kistoriches.co.uk).

"We started off by exploring the idea of our families and communities as sources of knowledge and cultural memory, and the power of heirlooms and traditions to connect us to the past. We then learned some simple local songs - often street songs - that helped start a discussion about local Scots dialects and aspects of identity. These topics formed a basis to go on and look at some larger songs that we could tease apart and use to learn about our local environment and working life." - Chris Wright
The next project on the horizon extends this early work. The National Library of Scotland (NLS) has for some years now been developing a national strategy to secure the country’s audio heritage. A new initiative called the 'Connecting Scotland’s Sounds' project (supported by the Esmee Fairbairn Foundation) aims to champion the preservation and sharing of Scotland’s sound heritage. To help the NLS achieve its aims, Local Voices has been commissioned to deliver schools workshops on Scots-language songs as found in a number of different sound archives. The goal is to simultaneously highlight the value of the Scots language and its culture to young people, while also demonstrating the importance of audio archives as a resource for education and community engagement with audio heritage. They will also be partnering the Scots Language Centre to maximise the legacy of the workshop outputs.

Folk culture emerges as a natural phenomenon from people associating in small groups; most folklore reflects a local character and identity. This means that any compilation of traditional material for use in education should include plenty of local items. To that end, Local Voices is partnering with TRACS to deliver CPD workshops for a range of professionals working in education and the arts to supplement the core material Gifting Every Child - a collection of traditional songs, stories, dances and other lore as a starting point from which parents, teachers and youth organisations can build their own local collections of folk culture.

Chris and Steve will be travelling to several locations in the country to help local practitioners gain awareness of the resources of traditional material relating to their local areas, and advising on how projects for young people can be developed using material from these resources.

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THE SHEILING PROJECT
RE-CONNECTING PEOPLE WITH PLACE

The Shieling project is a social enterprise inspired by the heritage, landscapes and traditional culture of Highland Scotland, working with teachers and young people to explore the natural and cultural heritage of shieling life and its significance today.

Going to the shieling (àirigh in Scottish Gaelic) was a traditional practice of moving up to the high ground with livestock to live there for the summer - a journey many would have made every year. Each summer, for a long stretch of our past, young people all over Scotland would play an integral role in taking the livestock up to hill or moorland pastures, camping there in small bothies, learning about the world beyond the village. Ruins of shielings are abundant in high or marginal land in Scotland. The mountain huts generally fell out of use by the end of the 17th century, although in remote areas this system continued well into the 19th century. In some parts of the Western Isles, the tradition carried on into the 1950s.

Founder Sam Harrison, whose idea it was to start the project, is a specialist in place-based education and a graduate of the Centre for Human Ecology. For him, the experiences on offer at the shieling link to the sustainability of the land and community, a sense of pride and responsibility, and increased mental and physical well-being: a ‘sense of place.’

Visiting the Shieling at Struy today, young people have the opportunity to get to grips with skills from ancient to modern: peat cutting to sustainable building, Gaelic work song and storytelling to tree planting.

The project also offers professional learning, becoming the first organisation to be accredited by the General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS) to deliver a professional learning programme for teachers in Learning for Sustainability. The project hopes to make an impact on some of the big themes of our times: food, sustainability, health and well-being.

“For the Shieling Project, understanding and immersion into the landscape isn’t an abstract idea, just to be talked about. Songs, poems and stories, alongside skills like basketry, peat cutting, walling, are all ways to engage body and heart (and of course the mind) in a relationship with the landscape that is more than just intellectual. With our whole selves engaging with a place, we can balance so many elements: the beauty of the outdoors, and the bloody midges; our hopes and ideas of the land, with the limitations of what we can actually do. Telling and creating stories of a place, in that place, can be very powerful. I have seen teachers in tears listening to what their pupils have produced.

Traditional arts like song, poetry and music are at the centre of the Shieling Project, because they are a wonderful way of cutting through to the heart of things, and building that emotional link to the land which is fundamental for happy people and landscapes.”

This is an example of a learning project that embodies the values and approaches that are vital if we are to overcome the crises of our time: ecological degradation, alienation and loss of meaning. It can help Scotland’s young people face a variety of challenges: increasing levels of unhealthiness; physically, mentally and in their local environments; lack of opportunity to go outdoors; lack of contact with heritage and traditions of their local area; and little understanding of food production or farming. In the case of the Scottish Highlands, many have grown up with a connection to the landscape but know little of the story of the place - the history, the cultural expressions of place, the poetry, the music, the language.

The project team has the ultimate vision of a modern shieling camp with a micro-dairy and learning centre, leading Scotland in sustainability and heritage education. The idea is simple: to explore the landscape’s past to help shape a more resilient future.

The Shieling Project is run by a community of staff, directors, advisors, the local community, funders and founders.

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6 www.tracscotland.org
'S e pròiseact dualchais a th’ ann am Fuaran a chuir Fèisean nan Gàidheal air dòigh gus ginealach ùr de sheinneadairean agus luchd-labhairt na Gàidhlig a bhrosnachadh gus órain Ghàidhlig as na sgìrean aca fhèin a rannsachadh agus a chruinneachadh.

Tha an làrach seo na eisimpleir de chuid de na chruinnich agus na chaidh a chlàradh le naoinear de na daoine a ghabh pàirt ann am Fuaran. Tha sinn cuideachd air mapa a chruthachadh a leigeas le daoine na h-òrain a rannsachadh a-rèir sgìre.

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The Greek philosopher Archytus said 'Perhaps place is the first of all things, since all existing things are either in place or not without place.'

As human beings we are always emplaced. In other words, we’re never not in a place. We don’t - can’t - exist in an abstract space with no depth of field or without a horizon of some kind. Those depths and horizons are what make sense of our perception, make sense of our experience as embodied. Places have the effect of gathering in those depths and horizons, giving them a sense of wholeness which enables us to return to them, remember them and classify them in some way. But as well as having those physical qualities, places are both an end point and a transition point of time and history, ever shifting.

Culture gathers in place, just as it gathers in the bodies which perceive place. As Edward S. Casey puts it, 'As places gather bodies in their midst in deeply enculturated ways, so cultures enjoin bodies in concrete circumstances of emplacement.'

It is the complete congruence of place and culture which interested Patrick Geddes, the great Scottish polymath. Place for him was part of a trinity that also encompassed ‘Work’ and ‘Folk’, all three necessary components of an understanding of the ecology of human settlements. One of Geddes’s champions, Murdo MacDonald, points out that, for Geddes, ‘Place Work Folk’, were not geographical, economic or anthropological abstractions, but the interacting elements of a process that shapes places not only physically but psychologically; how Folk make meaning of Place through acts of collective imagination.

TRACS’ new initiative the People’s Parish is very much about the kind of programme suggested by storyteller, Hugh Lupton. Part of its task is, as he puts it, to work creatively with reminiscence, anecdote and story on the individual level but also with the ‘myths of place’ which, ‘reflect the way the collective imagination and understanding of a whole population has invested a place with meaning’. From the point of view of the traditional arts this is the work which connects with the function of the bards within communities, creative people with a particular relationship to their co-habitants in a place, and crucially with a deep attachment to that place.

A great example of that is the musician and singer, Ali Beag MacLeod from Achiltibuie, described by his kinsman Kevin MacLeod, the well-known dance musician, as having ‘roots coming out of his feet straight into the sand and seaweed of Achiltibuie […] you go out on the boat with Ali and he can tell you all about the coastline, the names of places, and people who lived there in every small corner.’

Part of the engagement with place then is the engagement with it as the sum total of everything that has happened in it up to the present point (as geographer Doreen Massey put it in her memorable phrase, the ‘simultaneity of stories-so-far’), a present point that is constantly shifting and which contains within itself the inevitability of change. It is our knowledge of those processes of change and of our attitude to them, the layering of geology and climate, the physical changes to settlements wrought by shifting social and economic relations, which contribute to the meaning we invest in place, whether that meaning is sub-consciously felt by individuals or publicly expressed through the collective making and re-making of myth, legend and song. No two places are alike, each has its own genius loci, and each informs the self-identity of the people who live there in its own way.

The People’s Parish then is about working with communities to find and explore that genius loci, that sense of place, to dig into the cultural memory and find the resources with which it can be expressed creatively. What interests us in particular is how the ‘folk voice’ within that cultural memory can be used to help communities to say something about themselves to themselves - and to the world at large - in this early part of the 21st century.
In this we are emulating in some ways the model used in the latter part of the 18th century when ministers were enjoined to contribute to the Statistical Account of Scotland, a parish-by-parish summary of the economic and moral state of the nation. Now this sounds dry as your mammy’s washing on a dry day for good drying, but in among the lists of average swede production by the bushel there is fascinating information about the topography, occupations, stories and histories of places the boundaries of which are still recognised today. (The civil parishes only ceased to become a unit of government in Scotland as recently as 1930, and their boundaries are still used by the census today.)

They are a wonderful starting point for the exploration of distinctiveness of places - local details, landmarks, geology and geography, resources (the natural dimension); and our connections with the ‘layering’ of a place - of what has happened in the place before the present day and how the resonances of past events persist into the present (the cultural or human dimension). The difference is that, instead of the account being a statistical one created and edited by one person in a position of privilege (‘top down’), the People’s Parish aims to be a creative one, fashioned from the bottom up.

We have identified a 7 stage process for bringing the People’s Parish initiative to life (see panel) One example of action-research, developed by the environmental charity, Common Ground, shows how details can be brought to light. The ‘ABC’ puts everything on the same level, puts unexpected things next to each other and perhaps catches them in a different light. It can be quirky or commonplace. Different people will value different things, but that’s what makes it interesting.

If I was to think about my home community of Portobello in Edinburgh, for example, my ABC, off the top of my head, might include:

Amusements, the Beach, the Boatyard, the Cakestand, Cormorants, the Daisy Park, Eider Ducks, Figgate Burn, Georgian cottages, Gargoyles, Harry Lauder, Hugh Miller, Istanbul, Joppa Rocks, the Kils, Lee Crescent, Miami Vice apartments, the Prom, Redshanks, Setts, Town Halls, the Tower, Terns, Turkish Baths, Weather-vanes.

Others might concur or inevitably add to that and so a picture is built up. In that kind of detail lies the local distinctiveness which informs historical, cultural and ecological richness.

Geddes himself wrote:

‘Local character is no mere accidental old-world quaintness, as its mimics think and say. It is attained only in the course of adequate grasp and treatment of the whole environment, and in active sympathy with the essential and characteristic life of the place concerned. Each place has a true personality.’

It is our ambitious aim to involve the whole of Scotland, but we are taking as our starting point the 15 parishes in Midlothian each with its own distinctive character, from the expanse of Fala and Soutra in the south, to the sprawl of Newbattle in the north. TRACS invited local activists, artists and community organisations to a day to explore how the People’s Parish could work in the fifteen parishes of Midlothian on Saturday 10th September at the National Mining Museum, when a mix of speakers, a map workshop, and local song and story from Kirsty Law and Lea Taylor set up what we hope will be a fruitful start to the initiative.

**Purpose**

- To stimulate participation
- To empower communities across Scotland to access, explore, shape and own their local assets
- To record local culture
- To enable connections between local history, archaeology, literature, intangible cultural heritage and creativity
- To affirm the work of local practitioners
- To broker platforms for the expression and celebration of local culture and creativity
- To equalise opportunities for support

**STAGES**

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1 Edward S. Casey, ‘How to Get from Space to Place in a Fairly Short Stretch of Time’, in Steven Feld and Keith Basso (eds), Senses of Place (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 1996), p.46
3 Hugh Lupton, The Dreaming of Place (Edinburgh: Combe Martin, 2001)
4 Joe Peach, ‘Rhu Beag’, Living Tradition (114) 2016
6 Patrick Geddes, Cities in Evolution (London: Williams and Norgate, 1915)
THE DEEP CONNECTION BETWEEN MUSIC AND DANCE

In my recently completed PhD thesis, I considered the attitudes of Scottish traditional musicians towards dance and dancers towards music, and assessed how these attitudes might have evolved. A common theme emerged from the musicians and dancers I interviewed: to play successfully for dance, musicians should also be dancers.

I interviewed musicians and dancers involved with Highland dancing, percussive step dance and ceilidh dancing. These styles of dance share a largely common musical repertoire through the use of strathspeys, reels and jigs. Each style places different requirements on how the music is performed in relation to tempo, style and rhythmic emphasis. My respondents identified that there is very little available in the way of training for musicians in any of these styles - other than developing their own awareness of the different requirements of each dance style.

Highland dancers concentrate on achieving technical excellence in their performance of each dance. This means that they concentrate on the beat of the music rather than on the melody. Two dancers described their experience at a competition where the piper ‘started playing a tune that we’d never heard of, and we couldn’t work out where the beat was […] And then the judges saw we were completely lost, and stopped the piper to get him to play a different tune’. Dance piping and solo competitive piping are very different disciplines. One piper, with experience of both, explained that Highland dance piping is ‘a very different way of approaching the music’. He continued:

I could understand why I had been told not to [play for Highland dancing] because it’s actually quite difficult to change your musical mindset. You have to put aside a lot of the things you’ve been told, especially in terms of tempo. Marches, strathspeys, reels and jigs - these are the kind of tunes that solo players play in competition. Although they have the names of dances - the strathspey, the reel, the jig - there’s no way that a dancer could dance to the performance of a solo [competitive] piper playing these tunes. They’ve been altered beyond danceability.

Not only is it difficult for pipers to adapt their style of playing, but many pipers may not even be aware of the need to adapt. Some percussive step dancers I interviewed felt that the music performed in Scotland was not suited to their style of dancing. It can be difficult to fit the often complicated footwork to it. One dancer noted that when preparing for teaching, he would choose recordings from Cape Breton over Scottish recordings, although, he explained, ‘occasionally you might find one or two tracks on a Blazin’ Fiddles album, but not everything [is suitable for dancing]. You would really be hard pushed’.

Another dancer made a similar observation after experiencing disappointment trying to step dance to Scottish music.

She had expected that ‘almost any traditional Scottish music should be suitable [and] you could step dance to it. But I’ve found that that’s not the case’. It appears that a problem for step dancers in Scotland is that not many musicians are aware of the rhythmic emphasis and impetus that the dance style demands.

Musicians have different conceptions of what constitutes excitement and interest for ceilidh dancers but perhaps excitement and interest may not be what the dancer requires. Some novice ceilidh dancers told me that what they needed most from the music was a steady beat. They were so concerned with the physical geography of the dances that they were not particularly aware of melodic or key changes and changes in tempo could throw them right off track. A steady pulse meant that ‘it’s easier to keep with the music for dancing’ as one dancer explained. As dancers became more familiar with the dances, their musical awareness increased, but even experienced dancers noted that they needed a strong, steady beat from the band to ‘hold everything together’.

It seems that the more understanding the musician has of the needs of the dancer, the more successful the experience will be for both dancers and musicians. If you are a musician who aspires to play for dancing, get yourself along to a dance class!

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CEILIDH KIDS

Back in 2007, when my own children were small, I took them to a few family ceilidhs. At that time, it seemed that many gatherings were geared to families only in the sense that they had children attending (getting ignored or squashed underfoot, quite often).

There often appeared to be no concession to children’s confidence levels, attention spans, stamina, noise sensitivity or bedtimes. So I thought it would be fun to organise a little group so that we, and other families we knew, could have some fun together. I booked a hall for a pilot six-week block and soon our numbers had swelled.

Nine years later, my colleague Katy Gray and I now run four pre-school family sessions a week in Edinburgh. We have several bookings most weekends - mostly birthday parties and fundraisers. Schools and nurseries have invited us to lead sessions. CeilidhKids has participated in some large scale family-oriented festivals, including Scottish dancing among the activities on offer. Overseas families - often connected to the University - are keen to explore Scottish culture and many local mums and dads want to share half-forgotten dances with their children but need a reminder!

Whilst we welcome families of any age, CeilidhKids’ main area of specialism is the early years age group, accompanied by parents, carers, or older siblings. Our wee friends have short attention spans, so the success of a dance must never rely on anyone being in the right place at the right time. Little ones often wander off unexpectedly, or have their own ideas about how the dance should go (suddenly lying down in the middle of the floor being a particularly popular variant). If you are three years old and have been encouraged to spend eight bars heading for somewhere in particular, you need to spend the next eight bars settling into that place, not immediately heading off somewhere else.

Similarly, if a pre-school child is required to stand still for eight bars, you have to specify this, otherwise they'll just skip off elsewhere. To let go of your partner’s hand is very scary. To hold a stranger’s hand is usually impossibly threatening. Everyone has to be allowed to cling to someone else at all times, and it’s too much to expect anyone to stand on the correct side of their partner, so the dance mustn’t depend on this either. An adult may bring multiple children, so every dance must be possible with two partners, or whilst carrying a baby or toddler.

A few dances need very little modification. We finish every session with a ceilidh-style non-progressive Circassian Circle. We have made a few alterations to the Gay Gordons, Britannia Two-Step, Swedish Masquerade, (a big hit! - now retitled Giants, Trees and Frogs) and the Flying Scotsman, and written a few new dances of our own. Most are compatible with the ‘traditional’ version of the dance, so anyone familiar with the regular version can participate in the usual way. Children need to stand next to their adults rather than opposite, so the Flying Scotsman and Grand Old Duke of York involve a line of families facing a line of families, and two top couples slipstep down the middle simultaneously. It’s usually best to have only one main point of focus, so we tend to dance in one large circle or one very long set, rather than splitting into small groups. An advantage of this is that the set can progress at its own pace, so if a sequence takes an extra eight bars at some point, nobody gets out of synch. Having a sympathetic and alert musician is an advantage here, as he or she can just slip in a few extra bars as required…

We launched Ceilidh Kids in Glasgow in 2014, with local mum and dancer Mireia Anon-Rebollo at the helm. Mireia runs most of her sessions in nurseries and through the Gaelic school. Word is spreading, leading to several fundraising ceilidhs in the area, and Mireia is planning to run monthly family dances. Meanwhile, for me, one of the huge advantages of living in Edinburgh is the immediate availability of the Festival Fringe, in which it became obvious that CeilidhKids should participate. In August 2015 we organised 35 free family sessions, which were exhausting, hot and chaotic, but great fun and massively popular.

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SENSING PLACE - A KIND OF SEEING

NEW MODELS FOR CULTURAL PARTICIPATION

What stories are important to you? Sensing Place harnesses the power of storytelling and archive film to explore new ways to get involved in creative work that has its roots in where you live.

The project began life when we (producers Shona Thomson and Andrew Ormston) compared notes and decided to build on our respective work in developing new approaches to arts and screen programming in rural areas. More specifically, we were interested in the impact of screening local archive film in events. Hippodrome Festival of Silent Cinema (Shona) and Berwick upon Tweed Film & Media Arts Festival (Andrew) had successfully broadened audience interest with local screen archive material.

Sensing Place was created to explore how this approach could forge better connections between the resources of national cultural institutions and local promoters as well as providing a platform for creative work in rural communities.

We also wanted to explore an interdisciplinary approach that would combine storytelling, arts, curation and film. We were mightily encouraged in this by an early discussion with Donald Smith of TRACS who pointed to a close affinity between oral and cinematic storytelling. This was to be a project that was as much about the processes of developing and presenting work as the finished product, and our aim is to create pathways for future partnerships and projects.

We quickly realised that the project would offer most opportunities for collaboration by focusing on three adjacent areas and held a round of planning meetings with local partners ranging from venues like The Stove in Dumfries and The Dick Institute in Kilmarnock, to events organisers like Moniaive Festival Village and Alchemy Film Festival, to organisations like CABN and East Ayrshire Leisure. We learnt that there was a real and widespread interest in local screen material, whether it was collecting it, archiving it, or being creative with it. We also learnt that communities are keen to tell their stories to think about both the past and the future, and to link different generations in the process.

Communities across East Ayrshire, Dumfries & Galloway and the Scottish Borders are now working with storyteller (Jean Edmiston), filmmaker (Anne-Marie Copestake) and ‘screen bandita’ (Lydia Beilby) to create new site-specific works in partnership with local festivals and promoters as part of the Storytelling Festival's Festival on Tour programme. The three Sensing Place artists are a collaborative team, looking to combine and explore their different skills and disciplines as they work. You will be able to follow progress on our project blog (sensingplace.eu) and on our twitter account (@creativelachan).

Sensing Place has had tremendous support at every stage of development. Film Hub Scotland, Regional Screen Scotland, the National Library of Scotland’s Moving Image Archive and TRACS helped us on our way. Creative Scotland are supporting the project and Sensing Place is one of two Britain on Film projects supported by the BFI in Scotland this year. There will be a presentation on the project with extracts from the resulting work as part of the Scottish International Storytelling Festival’s ‘Dare to Dream’ programme on UNESCO’s World Day for Audiovisual Heritage - Thursday 27th October at 11am in the Scottish Storytelling Centre.

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Its background is as follows; in 2001 a group of thirty storytellers met at the Maison du Conte near Paris and experimented with multilingual telling and thought on the possibility of a European Federation. The first conference was held in Oslo in 2008; it then travelled annually to Switzerland, England and Spain. By the time it got to Belgium in 2012 it had become an international non-profit organisation. Rome in 2013 was attended by our Andy Hunter. By this time, non-European organisations could become associate members. It then went to Sweden, Greece and most recently France. Next year it will be held in Ireland.

This year, the main focus was on preparing for European funding in order to create an official Network amidst a full programme of talks, workshops and events. Each storyteller was asked to bring a song, proverbs, publication details of legends by a respected collector, a collection of seeds and a traditional drink. I wondered how many stories each teller had in their head and whether they had declared these at customs...

The conference started with France and the revival of storytelling in that context – its past and future projects. Writer Erica Wagner presented ‘Reality and Fiction’ which led on to a presentation around the telling of true stories with Jack Lynch and theatre director Hassan el Gueretly, who has been working with telling true stories of the Arabic spring. Brendan Nolan and Micaela Sauber from ‘Tellers Without Borders’ spoke of their work with refugees. Micaela spoke admirably regarding the use of storytelling in these environments, of the dangers of triggering and the positive outcomes if timed accordingly between PTSD which can become untreatable to PTG, post traumatic growth.

Given that the main focus this year was the European grant, we needed to ascertain how to define a ‘European Storyteller.’ What should their repertoire be? How should politics, social etiquette and nationalisms be approached? What makes a professional European storyteller and defines creative excellence? How should they be presented on social media and how? So many questions! With 58 languages – and the fluidity of story, its translations, versions, roots and its assumed and established ownerships - this led to a lively debate. A repertoire of themes may be the answer: those fundamentals that transcend throughout, love, kindness, peace, displacement, etc.

Bruno de la Salle from the executive committee presented his storytelling philosophy. He told me he had met Traveller Duncan Williamson in Edinburgh in 1972 at an Anthropology Society meeting. This is an example of the intrinsic link between storytellers: storytelling is a state of mind movement that sweeps along those open and willing.

The European library and collection of stories, legends, versions and translations will be discussed further in Ireland next year, but it was clear that the fundamental intention of storytellers is reflected equally throughout Europe and beyond. Of course there are differences in tradition and approach, in verbal etiquettes and referral methods. The question is this: how do we ensure intangible heritage is retained? By continuing our established oral methods and respecting them whilst being gracious, with the knowledge stories, once free, cannot be repressed.

Given the current political climate, displacement and the predicament faced by refugees were topics of great discussion. An Iranian student Nilufar Gharavi presented her designs and theory behind easily transportable units that can be taken into camps and communities for storytellers, artists and therapists to utilise. Bridging Borders is a simple and practical idea, supported by the NORCAP. The design is impressive and hopefully this will be embraced.

FEST continues to gather momentum, and every year more people attend. Like anything that involves varying cultures and languages, things need discussing and implementing gradually to establish a platform from which everyone can work. If the European grant application is successful, it could lead to some great connections and fabulous opportunities. Tandem telling between languages and an established library with origin and translated tales opens us up to really interconnect and create new links. It offers the opportunity to exchange best practice, learn and develop our skills and implement larger combined projects which can be built upon for years to come. Our involvement with FEST is exciting and full of possibilities.

Here are some links for you to gain more insight, along with the only magazine dedicated to storytelling in France, La Grande Oreille.

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I was struck, during a one month writer's residency in Finland, of the peer-to-peer approach to sharing skills and working practices. To me it made sense. Especially as adults - as most apprentice storytellers are - we come to this part of our journey with a richness of experience already gathered along the way. It makes sense to share that. So those were my thoughts: to help give a sense of identity and supportive community to the group of people wishing to be professional storytellers, and to in part do this in a skills-sharing and generously spirited way.

Though a serious word - 'apprenticeship' - the truth is it is a fairly loose apprenticeship and it is largely up to what each person makes of it. There are many opportunities in Scotland to make much of this journey - this schooling - this equipping oneself with the necessary skills, confidence and understanding to then work as a storyteller.

We have had workshops in how to incorporate singing into your storytelling, how to make use of props, how to project your voice, how to guide people in storytelling on the street, how to work with challenging teenagers, how to blend storytelling and museum exhibits, how to use storytelling as a tool for self-development. We have gone on shamanic journeys with our stories, learnt about archetypes as a way of inhabiting story characters, and much more. We always make a space for story crafting groups during this day, giving apprentices the chance to tell a tale in a small group and receive some feedback. I often ask someone from the storytelling community to give a short talk as a part of this day - perhaps informing people on what work they do, or to offer practical advice on how to publicise themselves as storytellers etc.

In addition to the apprentice days we also have performances, usually two a year, in the theatre, called 'Stories on the Way.' This gives apprentices the opportunity to tell a story to - we hope! - a fairly large audience in the theatre. Again, our style of working together is in the spirit of community with the essence of the ceilidh at the heart of how the evening is shaped and how storytellers introduce each other.

In my role, I am happy to meet with people and chat about their storytelling development. Other than that, it is a question of seeking and shaping your own apprenticeship.

I recommend that people to go along to the Guid Crack Club, to Café Voices, and also to go along to the many storytelling clubs and groups around the country that are springing up. These groups are immensely helpful and great fun. In this way, people learn what oral traditional storytelling is. They are given encouragement and feedback.

I also encourage people to do workshops - like Starting with Stories, and more.

Most people on the apprenticeship would agree that to reach a place where you can confidently and skilfully work in different environments and with different groups and audiences as a storyteller, it takes a lot of work, voice work, body work, understanding the spirit of oral storytelling, learning stories and how to engage with audiences.

The criteria for the Directory states a storyteller should have been working for three years - and in my experience that is often how long it takes. Of course it depends on where people have come from, and what they have brought with them. This is not a training aiming to turn out people who all have the same style - quite the opposite.

The apprenticeship fosters community, and growth, with the hope that the future of storytelling in Scotland is in fine voice and warm spirit.

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THE STORYTELLING APPRENTICESHIP

The storytelling apprenticeship - at any rate with that name - has been going for four years now, although of course every storyteller in their very different ways has undertaken their own apprenticeship. I felt it was good to have a word that gave an identity to a group of people, all of whom and in diverse ways, are working towards joining the Directory of professional storytellers in Scotland.
MY STORYTELLING JOURNEY

Since starting the Scottish Storytelling Centre apprenticeship programme in 2014, I’ve gained so much. My knowledge and skills have developed hugely and my love for storytelling itself has grown and grown.

Along with Andrew Coull, I run Suit and Pace, a performing arts organisation and social enterprise offering meaningful experiences with a focus on fun. We work mostly with children, young people and adults with disabilities and storytelling has become a huge part of what we do. It offers so much potential for generating discussion and I love working in a medium that focuses on creating a participative relationship with the audience.

When I turned up at my first apprenticeship session, I was definitely more of a writer than a performer (it had been years since I’d last dabbled in student comedy) but seeing how annoyingly good Andrew was inspired me to have a go. The workshops on the programme, generally led by fellow apprentices, really got me interested in traditional tales. I’ve been pretty much addicted to uncovering fresh stories ever since I realised how much fun it can be to make them your own, to draw out the humour, or a particular message. I’m especially interested in Scottish and Welsh tales, as I’m lucky enough to have a ninety-one year old Welsh Grandma who can teach me the odd snippet of her native language (I’ve managed to impress a few eight year olds with my limited skills!).

Janis Mackay runs the apprenticeship programme and is a huge support to all of us - a chat with her last year really helped me to move forward with my storytelling. She encouraged me to do a workshop on issue-based storytelling, a major focus of our work (and a particular passion for me, as a trained community education worker). This was a great bit of experience and led to me being asked to speak at the Village Storytelling Festival in March. I’ve picked the wonderful brains of storytellers including Sylvia Troon, Kate Walker, Sheila Kinninmouth and Ailie Finlay - everyone has been so generous with their time and advice (and Sylvia even let me play with her amazing puppets!). I’ve also been to Burgh Blethers in Dunfermline and Blether Tay-Gither in Dundee - these storytelling groups have given me a great chance to try new material in a safe space, and I’d recommend both as thoroughly friendly environments where you can get brilliant advice and suggestions. Andrew and I have also performed at the Scottish Storytelling Centre, providing a Tiny Tales session in January, which felt like a major achievement for both of us (and was also lots of fun).

Over the past year, I have built up my experience through running more than forty storytelling sessions, and after performing in schools, in tents and at festivals, I definitely feel like more of a storyteller! Storytelling always seems to lead to new challenges - I’ve started to develop my puppetry skills, I’ve learnt to juggle, I’ve made everything from bunting to pom-pom spiders, and I’ve walked around Kirkcaldy dressed as a jester (life is rarely dull). Performing alongside my fellow apprentices at ‘Stories on the Way’ in April felt really special, and it was great to see everyone developing their own styles and growing as performers. I was delighted to complete my apprenticeship this year and register on the professional directory. It has been such a supportive experience and I’d recommend it to anyone who wants to get serious about storytelling.

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'History is true but stories are made up,' is a persistent presumption. However, history is not 'facts'; it is the interpretation - usually narratives - that we create to make sense of the evidence we have. So, actually, history and storytelling feed off each other all the time.

That is why 'The History Press' produces books of folk tales reflecting the culture and traditions of all parts of Britain and Ireland. Scotland is strongly represented with eight existing titles, with another six to come over the next year. For my purposes, it is a happy coincidence that the most recent new Scottish title is Scottish History - Strange but True by John and Noreen Hamilton. This is a brava und recompound of the strange, the curious, the fabulous and the true! Our two storytelling authors are out to prove that truth can be more entertaining than fiction and they have done a first-rate job. The book is also very well structured and illustrated and would make a great present. It would be invidious to pick examples from such a diverse treasure trove - read and enjoy!

History is of special interest as 2017 has been designated Scotland’s Year of History, Heritage and Archaeology. There are lots of opportunities for storytellers and educators, so you might fruitfully dip into History Through Stories: Teaching Primary History with Storytelling. The caveat here is that Hawthorn Press' 'Storytelling Schools' series is based on the English curriculum, not Curriculum for Excellence. Nonetheless, the authors - Chris Smith, Adam Guillan and Nanette Noonan - provide a fresh and helpful selection of approaches with varieties of stories and cross-curricular connections to consider. The Scottish storyteller can make a creative transfer into Scottish specific resources.

What shines through is that it is stories that arouse our interest, stimulating active learning. It is where the story takes our minds and imaginations that matters, rather than the genre or status of story in itself. We begin with stories, then research and discover, and then create a richer, fuller narrative...and so on.

Sometimes this is called lifelong learning. Which takes us to the recent scholarly (and expensive!) book about Hamish Henderson, The Voice of the People: Hamish Henderson and Scottish Cultural Politics by Corey Gibson. This is an important study, undertaken by a young academic who did not know Henderson personally, but through his writings and recordings. It is a shame that Gibson’s researches are confined to such an academic presentation and sometimes style, because they are profoundly relevant to everything the Storytelling Centre and TRACS are trying to achieve.

Some previous commentators have seen a division between Hamish Henderson’s poetry/art, and his devotion to folk culture. But what Gibson shows is that his life and work were united by the desire to restore artists to the kind of socially integrated roles and functions he felt they had performed in traditional societies.

Having studied everything Hamish wrote myself, and tried inadequately to put it into practice, I could not agree more. In the words chosen by Tim Neat for the title of his biography, ‘Poetry becomes People’ - through creative struggle and social immersion. Never have we had so much need of the kind of holistic imaginative activism practiced and preached by Hamish Henderson, the Gille Mór. He is still a few long strides ahead and we need to be catching up on him in Scotland and across this struggling planet.

George Macpherson’s new book The Old Grey Magician goes in a distinctive new direction. George focusses on one strand of oral tradition, recovering stories of a mysterious figure ‘the grey magician,’ sometimes ‘the dark druid’, who plays an important but unexplained part in the Fionn cycle. Here, Skye’s redoubtable tradition bearer fills the gap, and repossesses Fionn from the literary verse of his namesake James ‘Ossian’ MacPherson. This is an exciting development, especially if it leads to Gaelic and Scottish culture taking a fresh daylight rather than Celtic twilight look at these fantastic stories. This is a part of our cultural heritage that has been sadly misrepresented and is ready for a new dawn. - Donald Smith

BOOK BLEthers
STORIES, STONES AND BONES

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