

Appendix

A new vision for Thurso





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HISTORIC CONTEXT

Thurso's history stretches back to at least the era of the age of Viking rule in Caithness, which ended conclusively in 1266. The Norsemen were attracted to Thurso due to its geography, lying at the mouth of a river overlooking a deep sheltered bay.

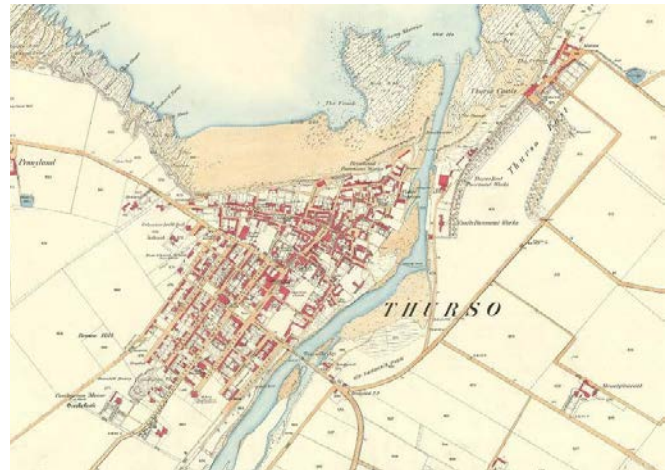
The town was an important Norse port, and has a later history of trade with ports throughout northern Europe until the 19th century.

Old St. Peter's Kirk is said to date from circa 1220. Much of the town, however, is a planned late 18th and 19th century development. The town was laid out in a strict grid iron layout by Sir John Sinclair of Ulbster in 1798.

A major expansion of Thurso occurred in the mid 20th century when the Dounreay nuclear power plant was established at Dounreay, 10 miles to the west of the town. Between 1955–58 Thurso's population expanded rapidly, from around 2,500 to about 12,000, as the nuclear plant attracted skilled migrants from all parts of the United Kingdom.

By 1960, it dropped back to around 9,000, after a lot of the initial Dounreay construction crew left the area.

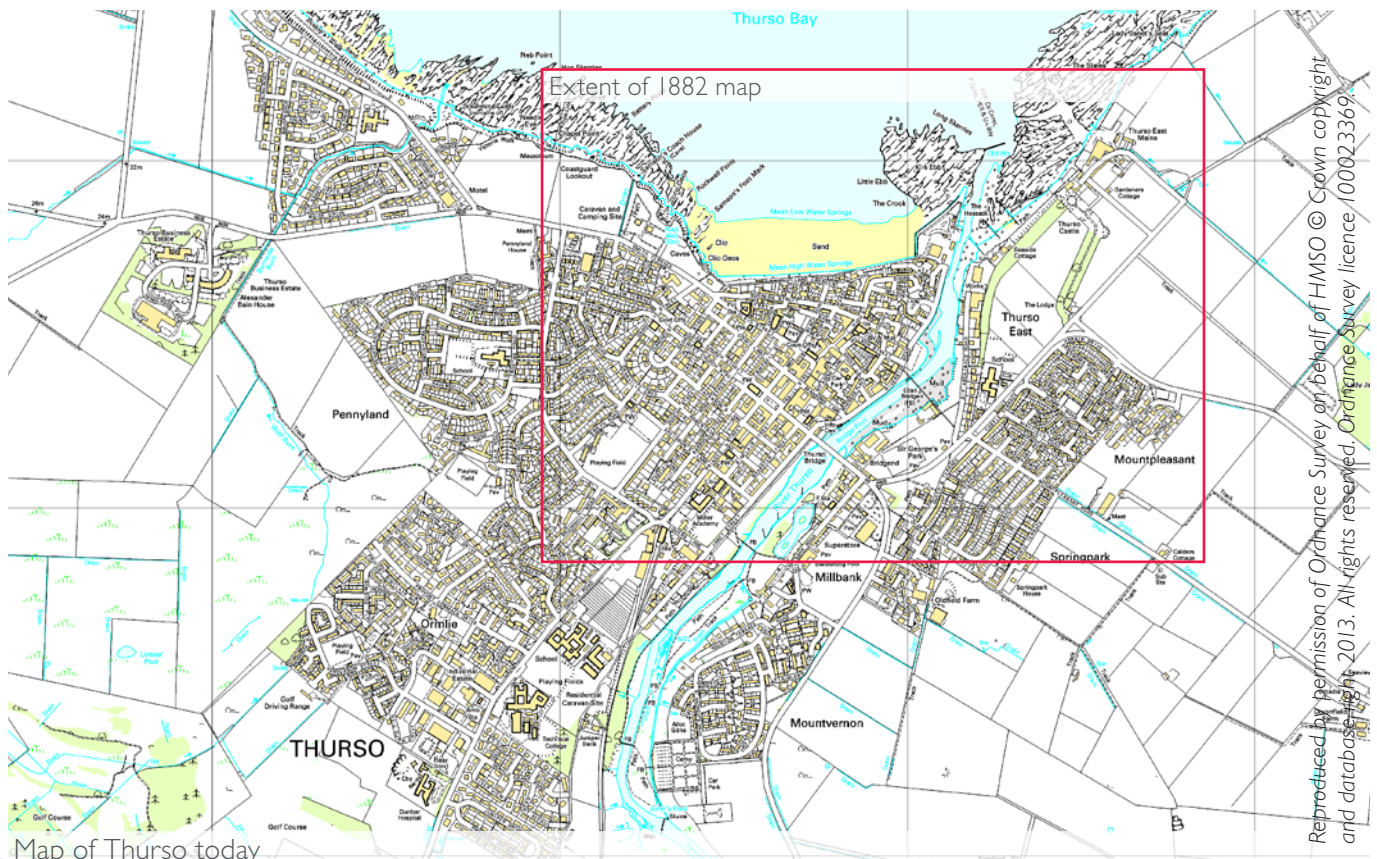
The map below illustrates the organically grown old town at the north western edge of the river mouth and the distinct grid pattern of the new town to its south.



Map of Thurso, 1882

Copyright Wick Society from the Johnston Collection

Today's map highlights how Thurso has expanded west and southwards and how new settlement developed along the eastern edge of the river.



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Background

The historic photographs below show the views of Thurso from the east looking over the river Thurso. Around 1900 the eastern bank of the River Thurso remained mostly unbuilt.

The aerial image below was taken before the commissioning of the Dounreay nuclear power station, before the town expanded largely to the west.



Historic views from the east over Thurso, ca. 1900



Historic views from the east over Thurso, 1934

The centre of Thurso hasn't changed much over the past century and the historic urban grain remains intact with high quality periodic buildings being preserved.



Janet Street, ca. 1900



River walk next to Janet Street today



Thurso High Street around 1950



Thurso High Street today

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Background

TEAM BRIEFING AND MINIBUS TOURS

The Thurso Charrette process began on Friday 22 February with a useful briefing session with key personnel from the Highland Council to talk the team through some of the constraints and opportunities within the local area. This was followed by a walk around the town centre to acquaint the team with the town centre, the waterfront and the riverside before heading out on a minibus tour of the surrounding area such as Scrabster Harbour and the Western Expansion Area, to better understand Thurso's local context.



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THURSO TODAY - A PHOTOGRAPHIC TOUR

As well as being the most northerly town on British mainland, Thurso is also the largest in Caithness. Situated on the shore of the Pentland Firth, its seaward views are dominated by the distant cliffs of Dunnet Head to the north east, and those of the island of Hoy, one of the Orkney Islands, to the north.

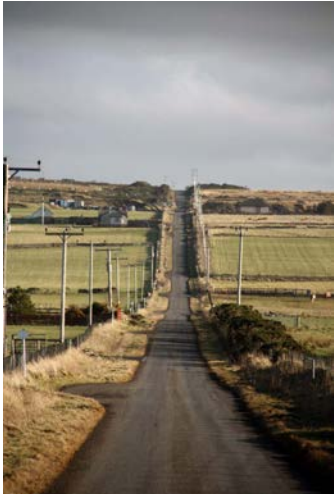
In recent years the sometimes turbulent seas of the Pentland Firth have led to the town becoming a focus for fans of surfing from all over the world.

About 10miles west of Thurso lies the Dounreay nuclear power station. The closure of the site is due to be completed by 2022-25.

The dramatic north coast stretches away to the west, while inland is the vast area of blanket bog known as the 'Flow Country'.



Background



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CAITHNESS STONE

The well known local stone is used plentifully in and around the area.



DISTANT LANDMARK BUILDINGS

The area is rich in distant landmark building from varying time periods.



Background

RENEWABLES

Investment in renewable energies is evident.



LANDMARK BUILDINGS - SPIRES

Thurso is equipped with numerous spires and towers surmounting the townscape which makes it visible from distant locations and gives the town a unique character.



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TRADITIONAL ARCHITECTURE

Thurso has grown through different architectural periods which is evident in today's town character.



Background

STREETSCAPES

Continuous building lines along principal streets are a characteristic of the town.



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TOWN CENTRE

Thurso offers a pedestrianised shopping street in the heart of the town centre.



Background

EXTENSIONS, ADDITIONS AND NEW BUILDS

Over the years there have been sensitive additions, infills and extensions throughout the old town.

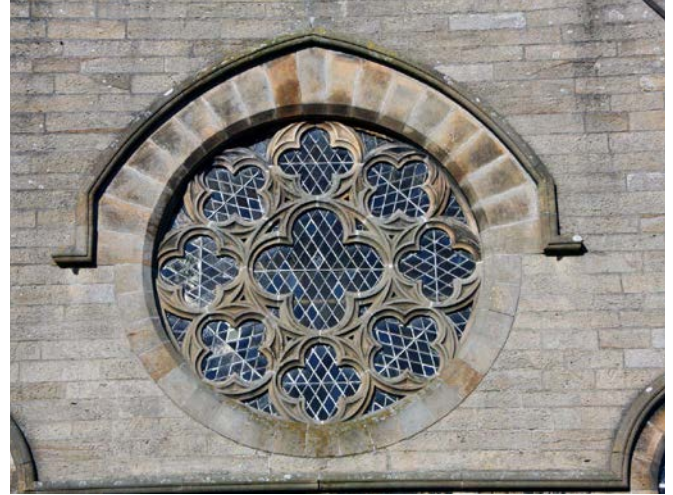


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DETAILING

Thurso is full of hidden architectural gems. Attention to details in the existing building structure is evident in many places.



Background



Appendix

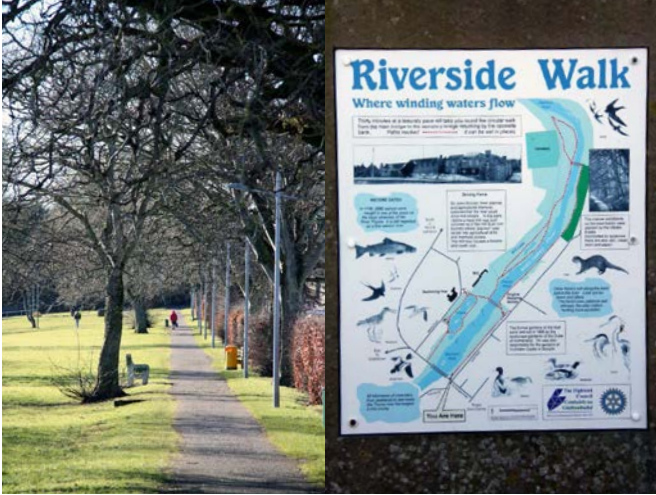
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THE RIVER

The riverfront has great potential with its existing wildlife habitats and heritage resources



Background



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THE SHORE

A big asset with the potential to become a well known watersport destination.



Background

THE SETTING

The area has wide views over Caithness and the Pentland Firth towards the Orkney Islands.

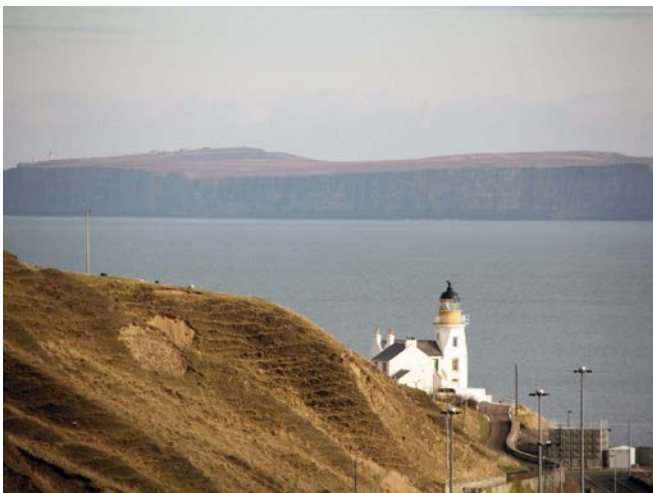


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SCRABSTER HARBOUR

The port of Scrabster lies about 2.4 km to the west of the estuary of the River Thurso, it is now the 2nd largest whitefish harbour in Scotland.



Background



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Charrette Process

POST-IT WORKSHOPS “THURSO TODAY” & “THURSO TOMORROW”

ISSUES

Community

- Centralised decision making
- Lack of local decision making power
- Lack of community capacity to help local people
- Over-reliance on the same volunteers
- Inward looking - do not see the bigger picture
- Decreasing population
- Lack of cohesion amongst active groups
- Plans are not followed through or acted upon

Cultural Heritage

- Poor marketing of historical and cultural assets
- Nowhere for artistic and cultural groups to meet
- Lack of evening activities
- Poor quality design of newer buildings
- Too many building are left to fall into disrepair

Leisure & Recreation

- Under-valued and utilised riverside environment
- Negative impact of high numbers of windfarms
- Little connectivity to the landscape for walking and cycling
- Lack of quality green space and play areas
- No public access to Thurso Castle
- Litter

Facilities

- Lack of community hall
- Absence of cultural centre
- Lack of facilities for water sports and other outdoor pursuits
- Lack of concert/theatre venue
- Poor sports facilities

Young People

- Inadequate provision of surfing and skateboarding facilities
- Lack of informal 'hang out' space for 16-25 year olds to meet i.e. WASP or Room 13
- Issue of noise and safety caused by 'boy racers'
- Young people leaving to find work

Tourism

- Untapped tourist potential
- Underwhelming tourist information centre
- Lack of celebration and interpretation of the history and archaeology
- Lack of information for visitors
- Few good quality hotels

Economy

- High street retailers are struggling to compete with out of town supermarket
- Loss of high street trade to internet sales
- Poor retail offer
- Lack of job opportunities locally
- Loss of employment associated with Dounreay
- Opportunity for skills transfer from Dounreay to local business
- Lack of good quality business and office space for small businesses

Development

- Coalescence between the town and Scrabster
- Too much scattered and unplanned development
- High number of vacant homes due to Dounreay closure

“ Caithness does not have an image.”



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POST-IT WORKSHOPS “THURSO TODAY” & “THURSO TOMORROW”

ACTIONS

Young People

- Give more power back to local people
- Reverse population decline
- Create a vibrant community
- Promote a community ‘ethos’ of working together
- Promote the town centre as a place for the community
- Be ambassadors for the town
- Establish a town team to take forward regeneration plans

Education

- Develop links with the North Highland College
- Develop new student accommodation and campus facilities
- Training in the renewables sector

Economy

- Create vibrant town centre
- Support and enable the Thurso Traders Association
- Better working together between business, trade & commercial organisations
- Support local/independent retailers in the town
- Incentives for small businesses to locate here
- Develop high quality business and office space
- Create jobs to stem ‘brain drain’ of young people
- Create variety of employment opportunities
- Promote dialogue between the community and the renewable sector
- Support expansion of Scrabster as a commercial port

Development

- Create coherence to development patterns
- The Old Mill site has great potential as a leisure and cultural destination
- Create opportunities for expansion to the west
- Industrial development should be moved out of town
- Redevelop spaces and sites within the town first
- Renovation of St. John’s Square Mansions

Transport

- Improve frequency of train and bus provision
- Improve parking signage and rationalise provision within the town

Environment

- Create a place where people want to both live and work
- Create new green spaces within the town centre
- Protect key views along the coast
- Protect the landscape from over development of renewables
- Utilise the river corridor as a community resource
- Protect the ecology of rivers and burns
- Develop community woodland as a local resource
- Café style streets in the town centre
- Develop community arts projects
- Develop creative and place sensitive architecture
- Use local materials i.e. Caithness

Tourism

- Celebrate Nordic roots
- Town promoted as an international ‘outdoor’ destination capitalising on surfing and other water based opportunities
- Develop a good choice of outdoor and leisure activities
- Develop the interpretation of historic and cultural assets
- St. Peter’s Church to be accessible again as the main tourist attraction of the town
- Create a central community hub for a range of cultural, artistic, lifestyle and youth activities

Identity

- Explore identity and quality of life movements e.g. Cittaslow
- Utilise local crafts, skills, materials and produce

“ How about some quick wins - could we have festivals, could we have local food!?”

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Young People

The discussions with young people in both Wick and Thurso were framed by the following questions:

- 1 What is here now that we use?
- 2 What do we want?
- 3 What do we need, and,
- 4 What will the barriers be to getting what we need?

The groups were asked to project 10 years into the future.

Below is an all-encompassing summary of the discussions from both Charrettes.

WANTS

- A range of facilities were indicated that would improve the quality of life for young people in both towns (Go Kart Track; a dog walking park, retail outlets appropriate to their age group etc)

- They were concerned about the steep drop in business activities and the closing of shops
- Surfing was something that could be developed to give greater quality of life and employment opportunities
- A better use of vacant sites within the town

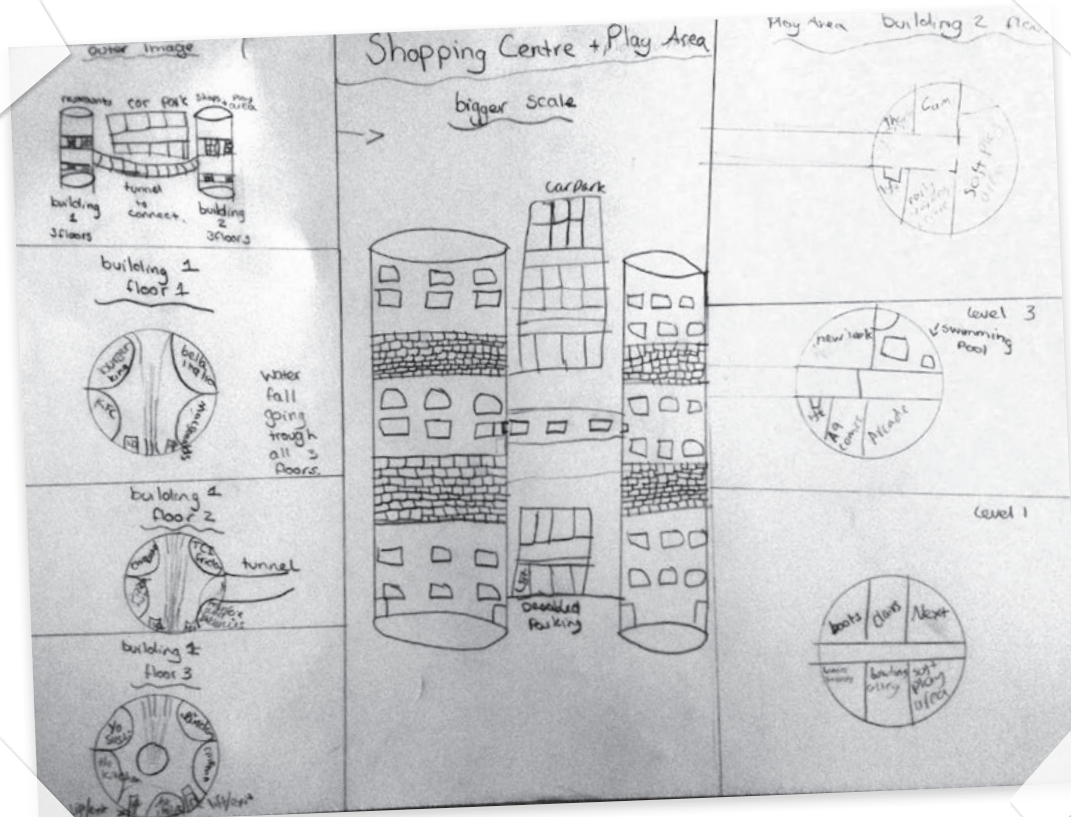
NEEDS

- They felt that Dounreay closing would have a huge impact on both towns and on them and the choices open to them
- To create a healthier population
- A need for more employment
- A steady stream of money coming in to the house
- More land released for building
- A bigger railway network

BARRIERS

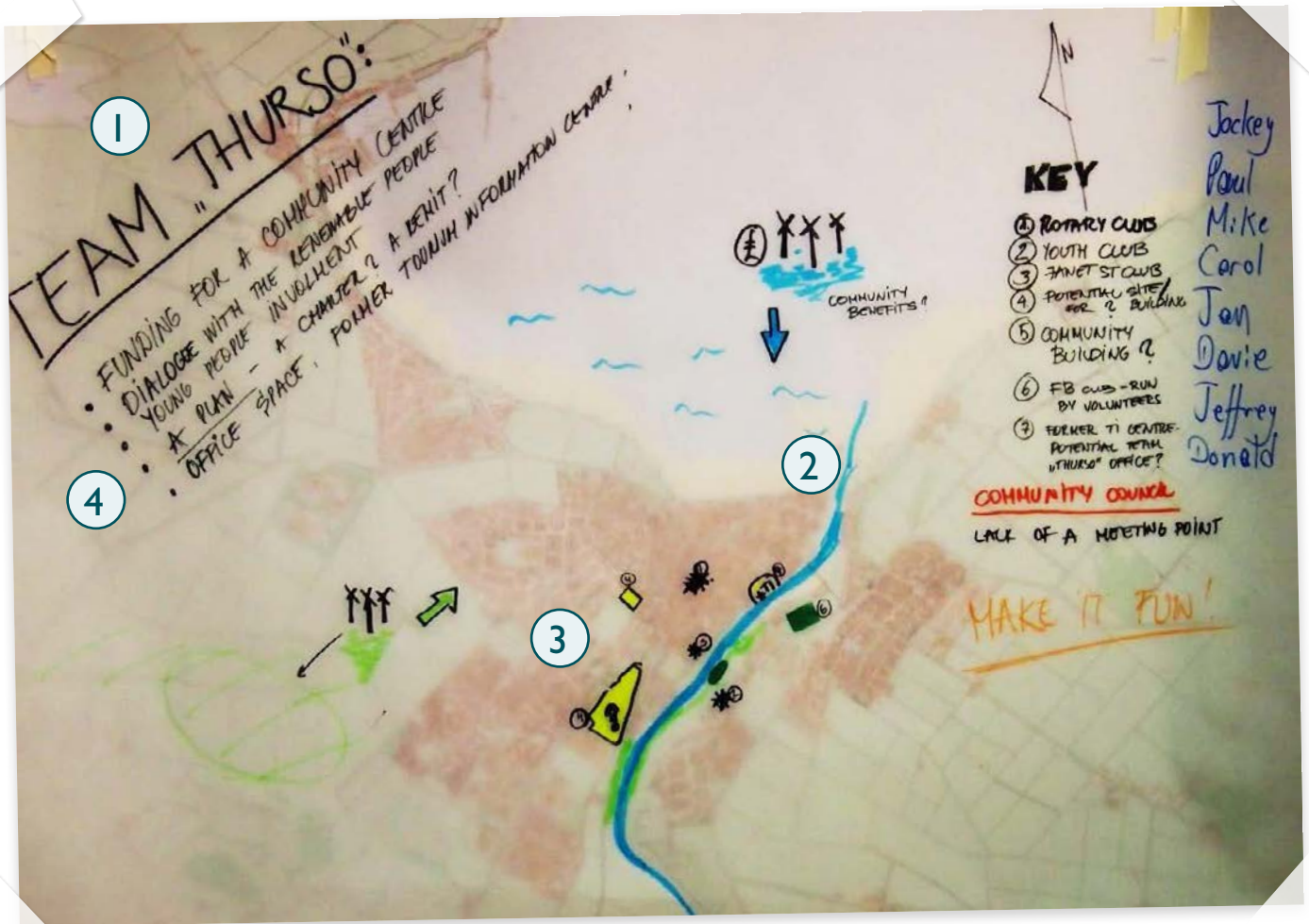
- No money
- No work
- Fewer opportunities

“ We’ve been delighted with the school kids we’ve found in Caithness! ”



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Hands-on Planning

HOP 1 - TEAM THURSO

Quick discussion held to determine the number and quality of clubs operating in the area, including (far from exhaustive):

- Rotary
- Inner Wheel
- Round Table
- A wide range of sports clubs
- Country dancing (although the high standard provision is in Wick)
- Golf
- Sailing
- Kayaking
- Horticulture

The Community Council were also represented in the group.

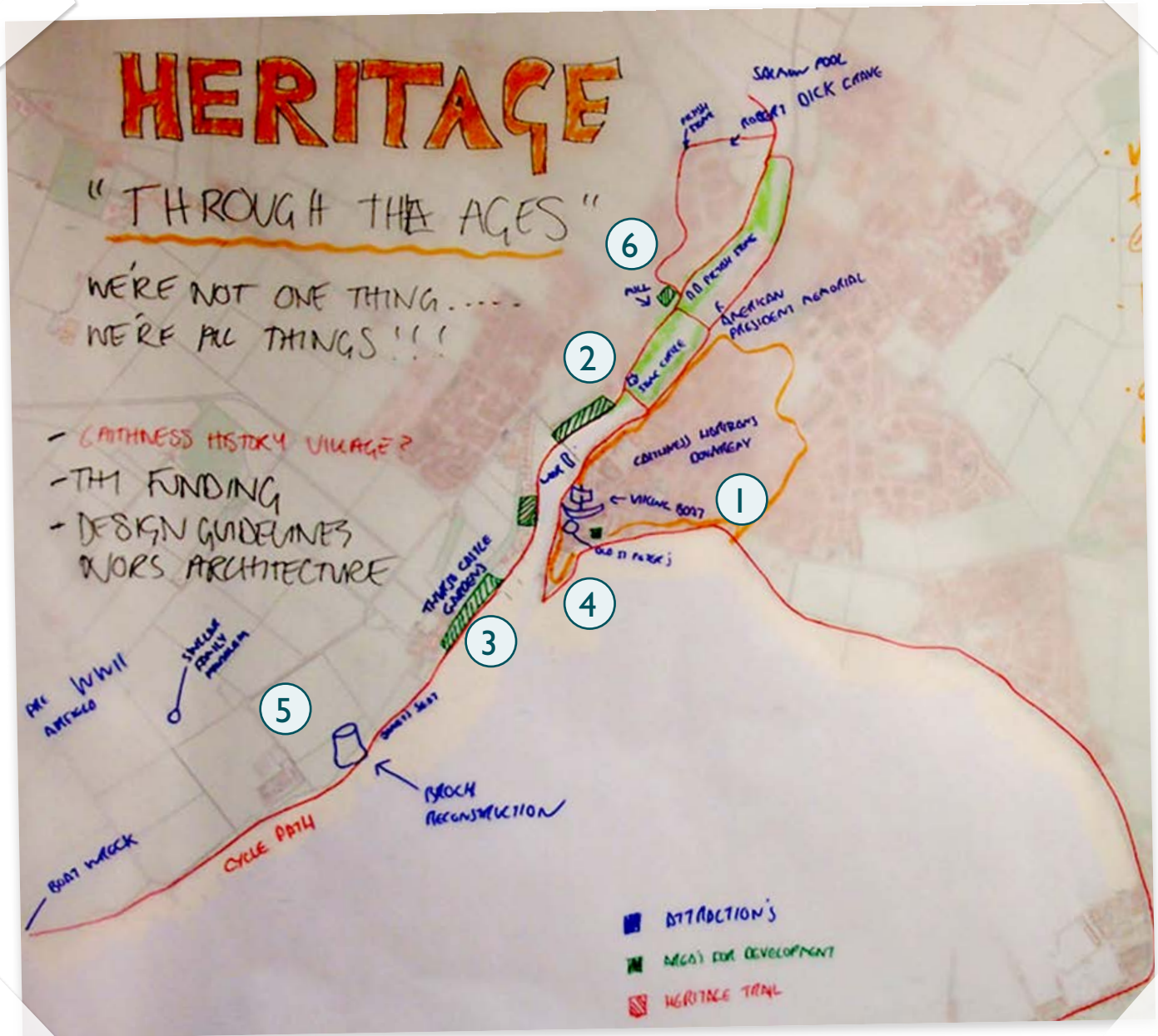
Issues arising from the discussions:

- 1 There needs to be a plan, a structure – perhaps a charter for the community to sign up to.
- 2 There is a considerable need for a community space to hold all manner of meetings, exhibitions and the like. There is a place near the river that used to be the TIC (tourist information centre)
- 3 A dialogue needs to start with those in the renewables sector to bring them closer to the community – to engage thoroughly – to link with the schools.
- 4 Enthusiasm to continue to work together alongside the Community Council to take forward many local issues



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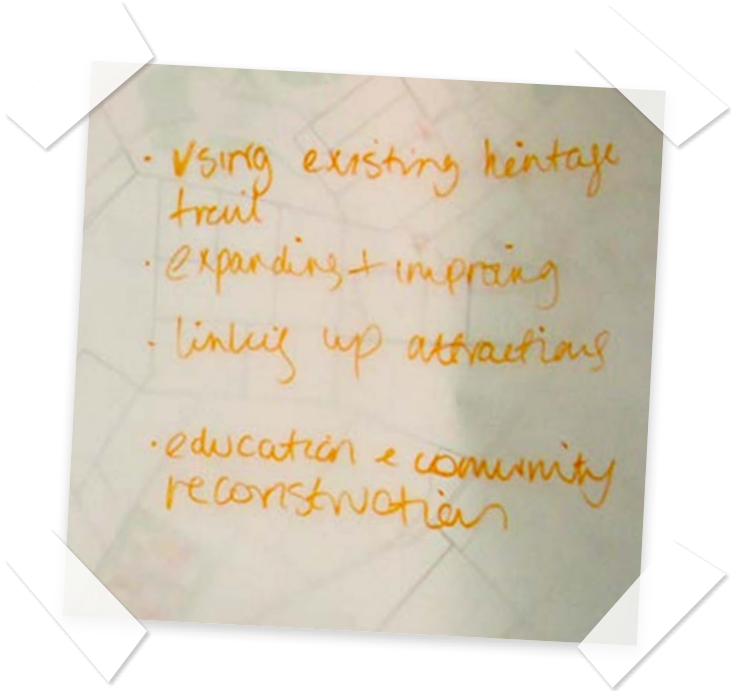


Hands-on Planning

HOP 2 - HERITAGE

After taking a walkabout to Thurso's harbour and riverside area the team mapped main heritage features and suggested new attractions along a proposed heritage trail which could highlight the town's rich history.

- 1 Caithness history village
- 2 Heritage route 'through the ages' celebrating all periods of history
- 3 New housing or parks along the river
- 4 Viking boat reconstruction
- 5 Reconstructed broch
- 6 Pictish and neolithic standing stones



“ We have different heritage layers and each layer has to be celebrated. ”



THURSO TOWN & RIVER WALKABOUT

- LEISURE / SPORTS
CLUSTER BY POND
- SPECIAL RIVER UPSTREAM.
'UNLOVED' RIVER DOWNSTREAM.
- MILL THEATRE / YOUTH CLUB
OPPORTUNITY
- SEA-WALL FUNCTIONAL SO
NEEDS TO BE RETAINED
- DISCUSSION ON DEVELOPMENT
OR NON-DEVELOPMENT.
- ^{OLD} ST. PETER'S KIRK HERITAGE
ASSET

Hands-on Planning

HOP 3 - THURSO TOWN & RIVER

This team undertook a walkabout around the town centre and the adjoining riverside to establish potential development sites and sites for improvements.

- 1 A range of options for the industrial sites to the south bank down-stream of the bridge should be explored.
- 2 Positive ways of incorporating a surfers' facility at a special corner of the river and the beach should be explored.
- 3 Funding to stabilise the Old St. Peter's Kirk should be found
- 4 Old St. Peter's Kirk site could be managed from the nearby Caithness Arts centre as a cultural facility
- 5 A Town Trail could start and end at the Caithness Arts centre.
- 6 Pedestrian links from the river up to the town could be enhanced



“ Good water sports facilities is what we really need.”



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Hands-on Planning

HOP 4 - ART & CULTURE

Strong agreement on the need for a 'village hall' for Thurso, following the loss of spaces in the Town Hall and the College, and the limitations on use of school spaces. Both voluntary and community groups, and professional promoters, are experiencing difficulties in accessing suitable spaces (a new promoting company, Caithness Castle Creations, has only been able to get space at Ackergill Tower).

This lack also places a limit on what arts activities can be offered for young people outside the school environment. Caithness has no equivalent of either the feis movement (partly to do with the tensions over the role of Gaelic in the area) or of Orkney's traditional music programme. Young people in the area are therefore losing out on the wider range of skills involved in such classes—communication, teamwork, social interaction, discipline. HIE has recognised the contribution that the Feis movement makes to Youth Employment issues by providing £500k funding over three years.

The priority therefore is to find a location in or close to the centre of Thurso where a basic range of spaces can be provided, both at modest capital cost, and with low operational costs. One suggestion was the Drill Hall in Sinclair Street which appears to be disused and given its historic location might be eligible for HLF funds.

It's recognised that there is a long term need for a more high level performance space for Caithness as a whole, especially given the possibility that the venue in Wick Assembly Rooms may be considered past its 'best by' date. But the best case for such a major venue would be made by making the fullest use of existing spaces. By comparison, for much of its history, Orkney's St. Magnus Festival had to present orchestral concerts in a dilapidated cinema, and even now many of the Festival's venues are little better than those currently available in Caithness.

The most serious lack in the area, therefore, is of umbrella groups for the arts, and of leadership within the community. The recent demise of Caithness Arts may leave an opportune gap for a new grouping to emerge with some new personalities involved.

Effective use needs to be made of the existing evidence—as with the evaluation of the feis movement across the Highlands (e.g. <http://www.feisean.org/downloads/HIE-Economic-Impact-of-the-Feisean.pdf>) --that arts projects and activities have intrinsic values for economic and social growth, especially in working with younger and older people, and addressing rural poverty.

These are the main points which came out in the workshop. Some further points that came out of informal discussions during the day:

'North Highland Connections' plans for the refurbishment of three historic buildings in Caithness as cultural centres <http://www.northhighlandconnections.org/strategy> were discussed. Whilst investment in the region is welcome there was discussion about placing facilities in the town centre versus a rural setting and the level of engagement of the NHC with the community when drawing up the proposals.

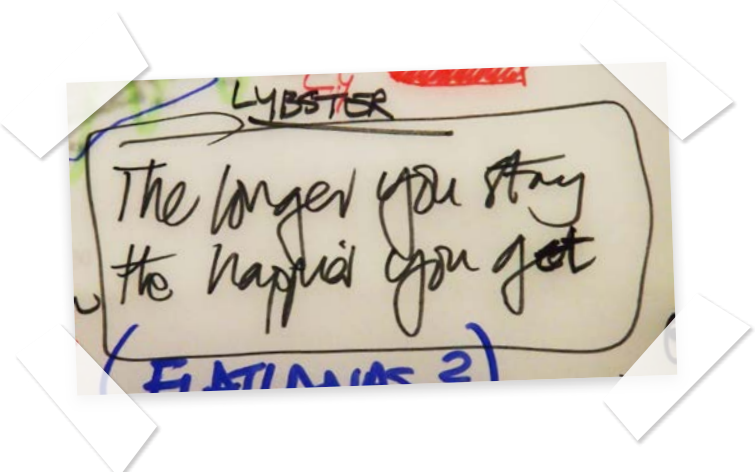
Two members of staff of Caithness Horizons, Beki Pope and Helen Moore, are fundraising to convert an ex-naval building outside Thurso, under the banner Caithness Craft Art Skate Surf Ltd, <http://www.investcaithness.com/news/archive/ex-naval-base-targeted-for-major-arts-venture> to provide space for young people to work. This would complement, not compete with, the 'village hall for Thurso' concept as it is both well outside the town, and is not intended primarily as a public space.

- 1 Strong agreement on the need for a 'village hall'
- 2 Voluntary and community groups, and professional promoters, are experiencing difficulties in accessing suitable spaces
- 3 Limit on arts activities for young people outside school
- 4 Find a location in or close to the centre of Thurso - at modest capital cost, and with low operational costs
- 5 Long term need for a more high level performance space for Caithness as a whole
- 6 Umbrella groups for the arts, and of leadership within the community
- 7 Effective use needs to be made of the existing evidence-base

Hands-on Planning

HOP 5 - CAITHNESS NORDIC ISLANDS

- 1 The Lowlands beyond the Highlands;
- 2 The Orkneyinga Saga – Moddan Mórmaer of Caithness
- 3 Coastal Path – “wildness”, archaeology, views and castles;
- 4 The Flow Country – wilderness, environmental sensitivity, exploration, dark skies, northern lights;
- 5 The Wick – Thurso agricultural (& transport) corridor.

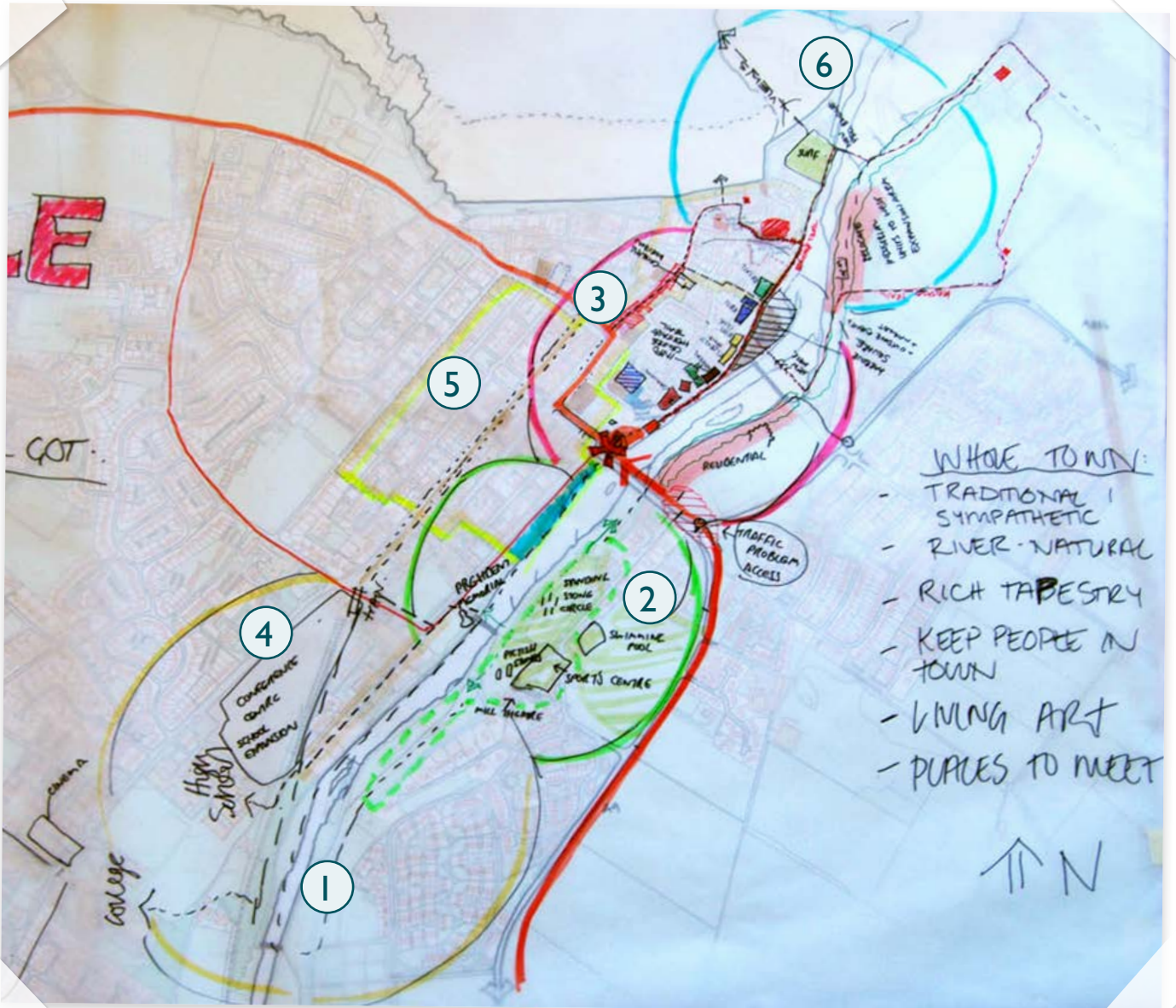


“ In Caithness, we don’t know what’s under our feet. ”



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The four rings:

- Watersport activities
- Town centre, retail
- Leisure and recreation
- Education & creativity

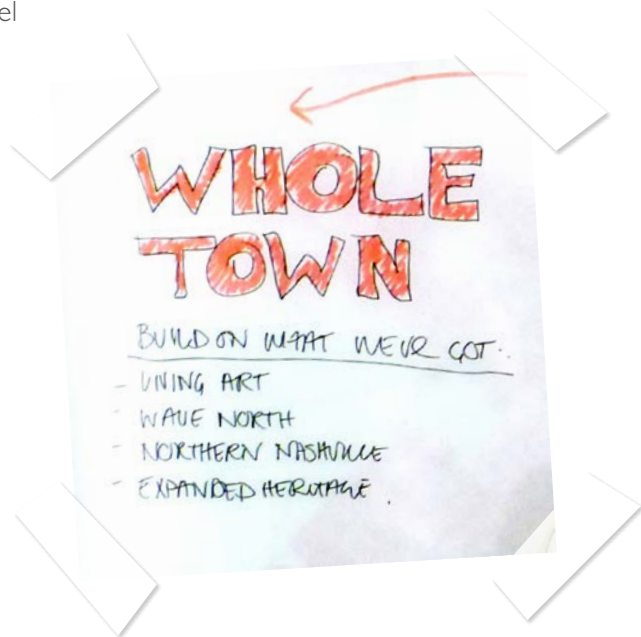
“ Get North! ”

Hands-on Planning

HOP 6 - THE WHOLE TOWN

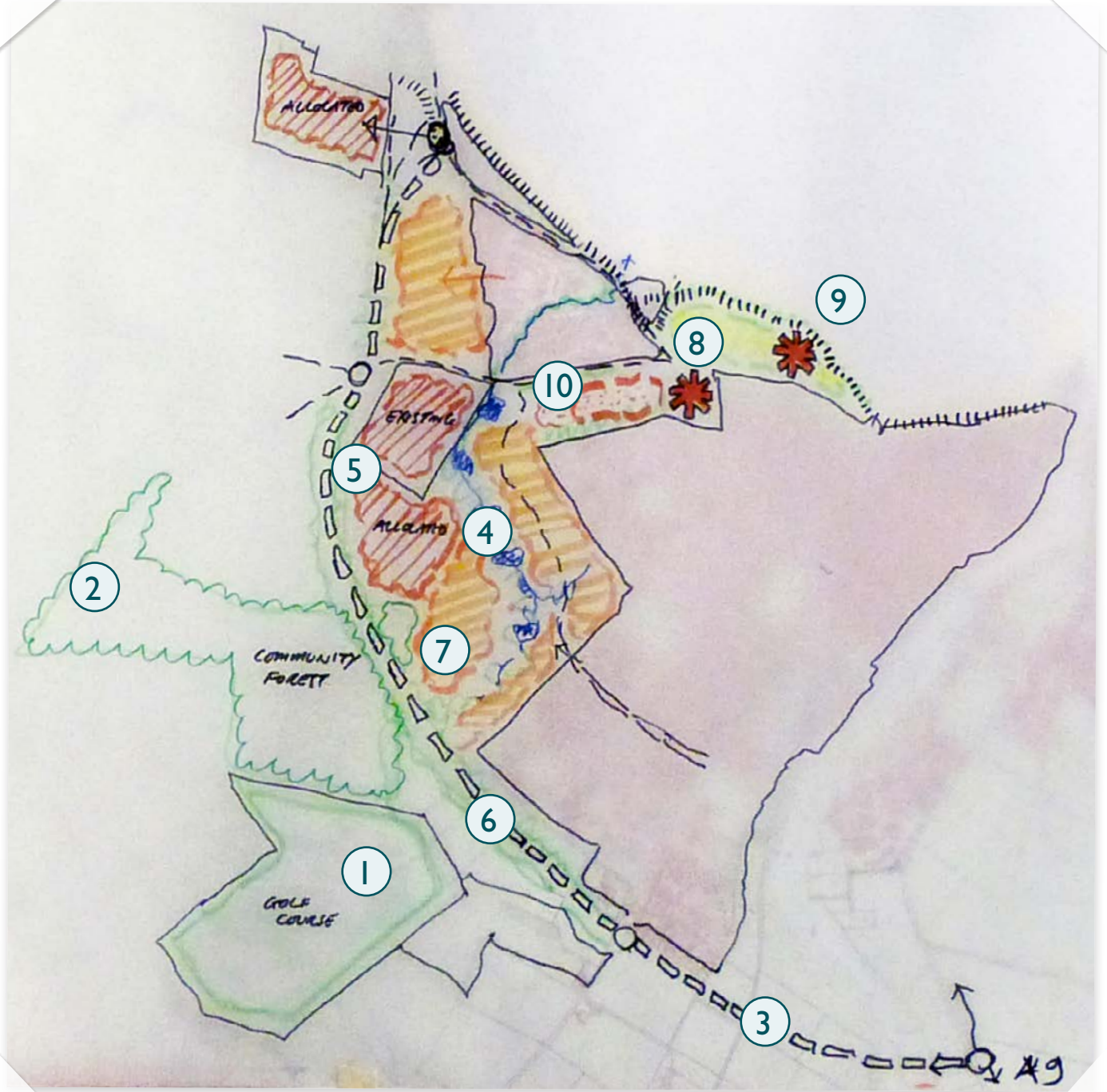
- 1 The Riverside should be respected and developed as a community resource
- 2 New leisure and recreation hub
- 3 Tourist centre and space at the main entrance to the town
- 4 Utilise the Mart Site for education and creative hub – close to the train station so that people can travel from Wick
- 5 Nordic architecture guidelines
- 6 Outdoor pursuits destination

“The Mart site is out of game - it’s not good for anything.”



Appendix

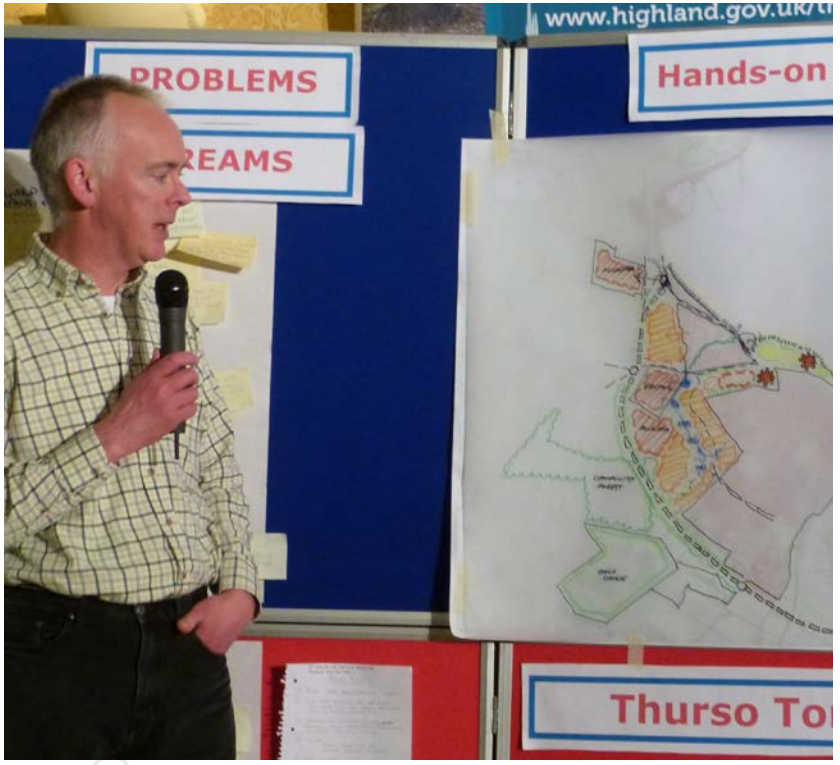
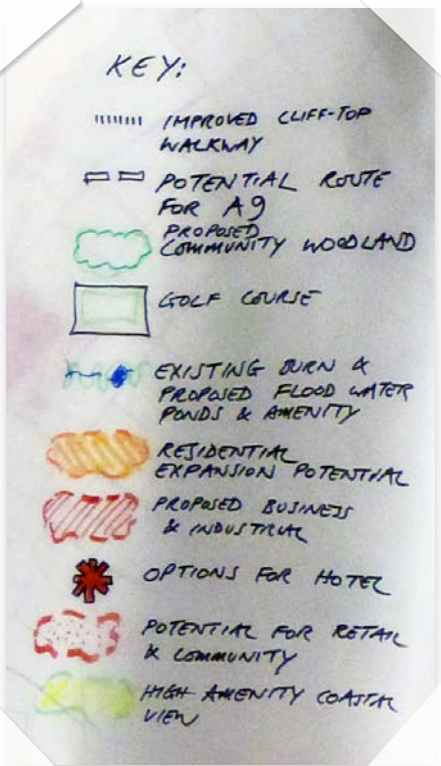
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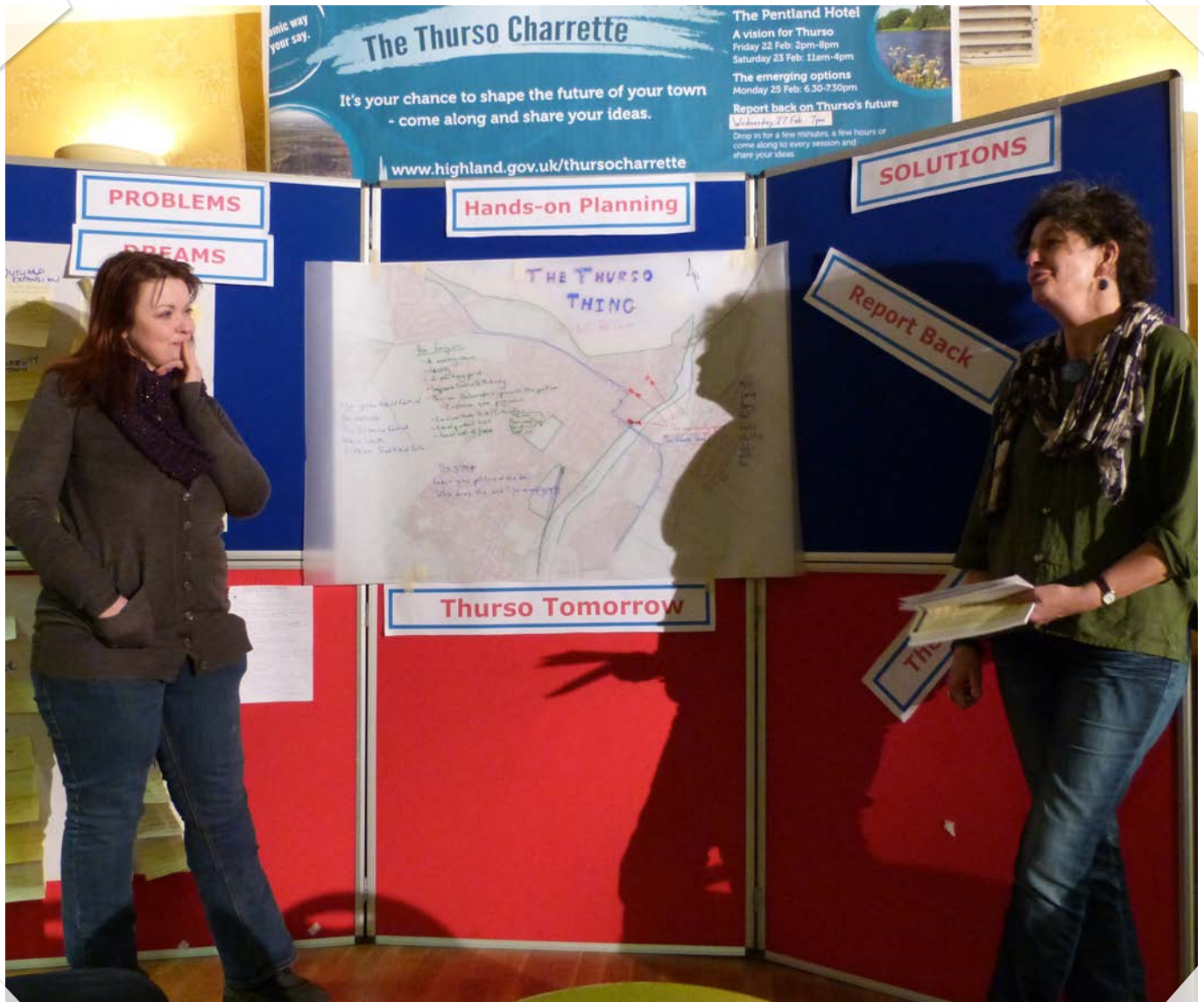
HOP 7 - THURSO WESTERN EXPANSION

- 1 Existing Golf Course tree-planting amenity
- 2 Proposed Community Woodland to be managed by Forestry Commission
- 3 Road from High Ormlie to be extended
- 4 Burn developed as ecological amenity with flood retention ponds
- 5 Existing and proposed industrial, business and future business or mixed use
- 6 Routing of A9 Thurso Relief Road to west with forested treatment
- 7 Areas for residential expansion
- 8 Optional sites for a new hotel
- 9 High Amenity Cliff-top site
- 10 Mixed use retail store/other community facilities / play



Appendix

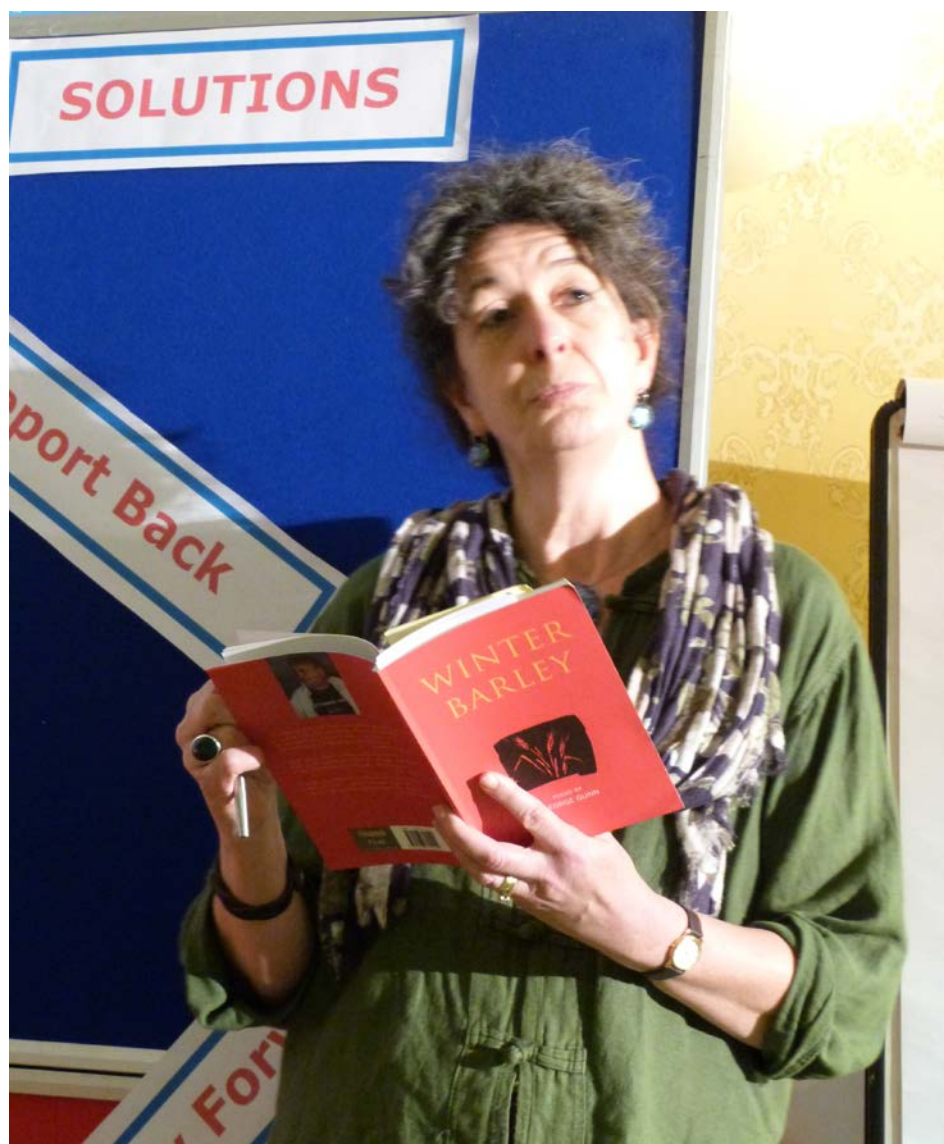
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Hands-on Planning

HOP 8 - THE THURSO 'THING' (OVER THE TOP)

- 1 Leave politics at the door
- 2 A new identity
- 3 A community space
- 4 A meeting venue
- 5 A starting point
- 6 Improve links with Orkney
- 7 Thurso Ambassadors
- 8 Customer Care Programme
- 9 Local 'Hall of Fame'
- 10 Local Produce Trail



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FAMOUS FROM CAITHNESS

ARTHUR SINCLAIR - AMERICAN PRESIDENT
James Traill - Flagstone industry
(Castletown)
SIR JOHN SINCLAIR. (AGRICULTURAL)
SIR J.
AND THE DEEP MINDED. (ICELAND
CONNECTION.
VIKING WOMAN WHO
SAILED A KNARR BOAT
FROM THURSO.
ROBERT SICK (BOTANIST)
ALEXANDER BAIN ELECTRIC CLOCK
WILLIAM SMITH BOYS BRIGADE
GEO. BAIN
NEIL GUNN (AUTHOR) DUNBEATH

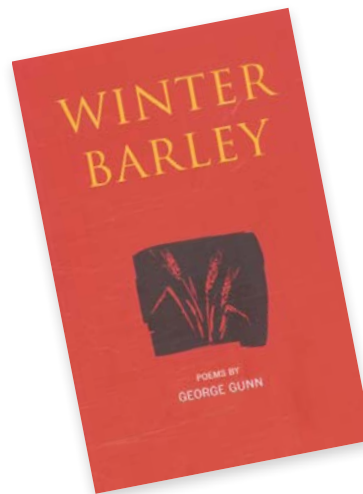
So who do you know?
Famous people from Thurso
JOCK CAMPBELL (V.C. WINNER)
ROBERT DEIL - BOTANIST
GEORGE GUNN - PLAY RIGHT
SIR WILLIAM SMITH (BOYS BRIGADE)
ARCHIBALD SINCLAIR (1st Scottish statistical account)
ANNE McKEVITT

LOCAL FAMOUS PEOPLE

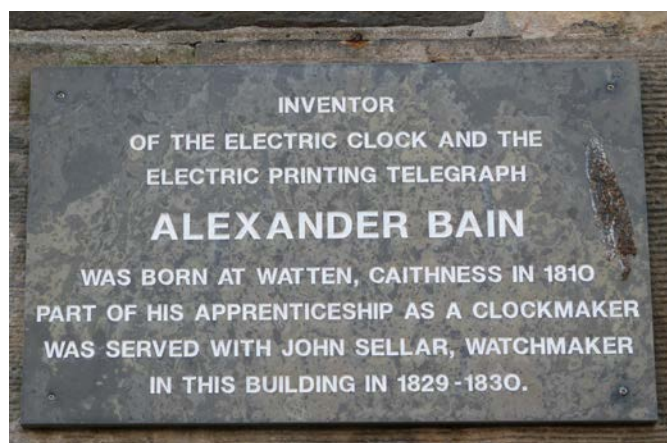
A number of famous past and present individuals have their family roots in Thurso or played an important role in the development of the town. To establish some of these influential people participants were asked to collaborate names of personalities which could help strengthen the image of the local area and the town itself as a tourist destination.

The following people were listed:

- 1 Arthur Sinclair:
Merchant's son, a soldier in the American Revolutionary War; friend of George Washington. He was born in Thurso in 1736.
- 2 James Traill:
James Traill's lasting legacy was the establishment of the globally exporting Flagstone Industry in 1793, Castletown
- 3 Sir John Sinclair
(1754 –1835) Scottish politician who was instrumental in the creation of the Board of Agriculture. He was born at Thurso Castle .
- 4 Aud the deep minded
Icelandic saga about a viking woman who sailed a self build knarr boat from Thurso.
- 5 Robert Dick
Scottish geologist and botanist who devoted himself to studying and collecting the plants, mollusca and insects of a wide area of Caithness and in his later life the rocks and fossils in the area.
- 6 Alexander Bain
Scottish inventor and engineer who was first to invent and patent the electric clock. Bain was born in Watten, Caithness.
- 7 Sir William Alexander Smith
The founder of the Boys' Brigade, was born in Pennyland House, Thurso.
- 8 George Bain
(1881-1968) was born in Scrabster, a Scottish artist who is often referred to as the "father of modern Celtic design."
- 9 Neil Miller Gunn
(1891 – 1973) was a prolific novelist, critic, and dramatist who emerged as one of the leading lights of the Scottish Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s. Gunn was born in the village of Dunbeath, Caithness.
- 10 Jock Campbell
Officer in the British Army, recipient of the Victoria Cross. Born in Thurso 1894
- 11 George Gunn
Is a well known playwright with some twenty professional productions to date. George Gunn was born in Thurso in 1956 where he still lives
- 12 Archibald Sinclair
1st Viscount Thurso. Sinclair was a British politician and leader of the Liberal Party.
- 13 Anne McKeivitt
Entrepreneur, TV personality, author and philanthropist born in Caithness



'Winter Barley' by George Gunn



Plaque in memory of Alexander Bain seen in Wick

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invest
Caithness

The Right Time
The Right Place
The Right People

Scrabster harbour



Wick harbour (aerial view)



Quayside loading/unloading



Students at Engineering, Technology & Energy Centre



The Right Time

- The successful Pentland Firth & Orkney Waters leasing programme awarded 11 wave or tidal sites for development, with an overall potential generating capacity of 1.6GW.
- Moray Offshore Renewables Ltd and Beatrice Offshore Windfarm Ltd are developing proposals to generate a combined 2.3GW of power from two major offshore wind sites in the Moray Firth.
- Scottish & Southern Energy has announced investment of almost £1bn over the next ten years to upgrade the electricity grid in the north of Scotland.
- Around £100M of investment in key local projects has been spent or committed since 2008.

The Right Place

- Caithness ports such as Wick, Gills and Scrabster are close to wave and tidal sites in the Pentland Firth and Orkney waters, and to the Moray Offshore and Beatrice Offshore Wind sites in the Moray Firth.
- Daily scheduled flight connections from Wick Airport to hubs at Aberdeen/ Edinburgh and excellent 24/7 support/ refuelling facilities for charter and helicopter traffic.
- Good Trunk Road connections to Inverness, Aberdeen and Edinburgh.
- Excellent range of business space and industrial sites, including the renewables-focussed Enterprise Area at Scrabster.
- State-of-the-art training facilities, developed in partnership with industry, at Thurso's Engineering, Technology & Energy Centre offer apprentice-to degree-level opportunities.
- The Centre for Energy & the Environment – part of the University of the Highlands & Islands - is home to the internationally-recognised Environmental Research Institute, and the research-led "Marine Renewable Energy & the Environment" programme.

The Right People

- Experienced supply chain of local, national and international companies with over 50 years' innovative working in controlled and hazardous environments, providing engineering, project support, manufacturing, fabrication. Almost one third of the area's working population is in a technical, professional or skilled trades occupation.
- £2.3M "Make The Right Connections" skills transition programme, led by Caithness Chamber of Commerce, to support re-skilling of businesses and individuals focussing on opportunities in new and emerging sectors such as renewables.
- The decommissioning of the Dounreay Nuclear site will reach its conclusion around 2020, but staff numbers will reduce over the next eight years, creating a unique "pipeline" of available skilled personnel.
- A structured programme of work with schools aims to boost the teaching and learning of STEM subjects, and to boost understanding of opportunities in the energy sector for students.

Contact the Invest Caithness team at enquiries@investcaithness.com or on 01847 630200

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Efforts to secure future opportunities for the north economy continue to be the focus of the bodies working under the banner of the Caithness & North Sutherland Regeneration Partnership.

Local Economy

The workshop started with a presentation by Eann Sinclair, Programme Manager Caithness & North Sutherland Regeneration Partnership.

- 1 The town centre has lost its vibrancy due to the competition with the internet and competition with supermarkets
- 2 Some property owners are not being responsible in looking after their empty buildings
- 3 The town centre is not just about retail but many other aspects of enjoying the place
- 4 The Chamber of Commerce is very active and supportive in the area.
- 5 Whenever a continental market comes it is well supported – we should try for a regular farmers market offering some of our great local produce.

“ Caithness could be the Saudi Arabia of wind and tidal power.”

“ Our tourism activity has great potential – it simply needs unlocking, co-ordinating and communicating.”



