

**Spiritual, Social and Political Perspectives
Land Reform and Community Buyouts in Scotland
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Spiritual, Social and Political
Perspectives on Land Reform and
Community Buyouts in Scotland



Alastair Cameron
Volunteer with Action Party



How Do We Create Good Places:

Party's Pathbreaking Bellfield Community Buyout

<https://bellacaledonia.org.uk/2017/03/29/vote-yes-to-community-ownership/>
<https://www.bellfield.scot/>

The vision: "To create a community-led social hub that helps build, celebrate and support the collective and individual life of the community in a building that is fully accessible to all".

This is the first urban community right to buy in Scotland, being a buy out that is enabled by the urban Community Right to Buy (CRtB) aspect of the 2015 Community Empowerment Act which come into force in April 2016 just as the Bellfield campaign was kicking off. It is the first urban community right to buy, but not necessarily the first urban community buy out. The new legislation enables urban communities to join rural communities in being able to claim the right to have the first go at raising the market value, and so being able to insist that places that matter to them stay in, or return to, community hands.

I'm here to tell you about Bellfield, the former Old Parish Church of Portobello. Here it is (my wife on her way to Pilates class),



and it's located exactly between the busy Portobello High Street and the famous Promenade and beach.



My Bellfield story starts with a Saturday morning meeting over a cup of coffee and a bacon roll in Portobello's Beach House café – this must have been late March 2016.

My friend Justin Kenrick had been keeping tabs on developments in the local Church of Scotland, as they went through the painful process of merging three Portobello congregations into one. He had just heard that they had made the decision to put the second of their redundant properties on the market – the Old Parish Church, now known as Bellfield, from the street where it's located.

So Justin gathered about six of us together: we all felt that another market sale of a key building in our community would be likely to leave us further depleted of facilities where the community could meet, play, connect and thrive. Surely there was a way we could step forward and challenge this seemingly inevitable process?

Another person at that meeting was Ian Cooke. Ian has lived in Portobello most of his life, and is the Director of DTAS – Development Trusts Association Scotland. As such, he has his finger on the pulse of community infrastructure, and he told us that the next month, the community right to buy was to be extended to urban communities. The path that had led from the Assynt crofters, through Gigha, Eigg, Knoydart and other locations was being broadened.

This galvanised the group, and we decided to set up a Save Bellfield campaign. We drafted a basic constitution, and called a meeting to assess support.



A mere 3 weeks later, 70-odd local residents turned up on a Saturday morning, and unanimously supported the idea that the buildings be saved for the community.

A steering group was recruited, and we noted a huge range of ideas about what the facility might be used for.



This brought home to me the meaning of the concept of 'social capital'. On the steering group, we not only had Ian, with all his skills and knowledge from DTAS, and Justin, who is an academic anthropologist working internationally on issues of land ownership and control. We had Morag Donaldson, a Party resident for all her 70 years, with an outstanding network of friends and contacts throughout the community, particularly in the churches. We had Shauna MacDonald, working actor and director of Edinburgh Youth Theatre, which is the most significant tenant of the building now we're in operation. We had Jen Elliot and Kyrsta MacDonald-Scott who had been involved in running the local after-school club and the Toddlers' Hut respectively. And we had Green Party activist Mary Campbell, now a city councillor, who had vast and detailed experience of canvassing across the ward. And unlike myself, Morag, Justin and Ian, these younger women understood instinctively the way to use social media.

These last two became vital as we discovered going through the right to buy process, which certainly wasn't simple. I'm now going to take you through the journey from that meeting through this....



to this:



The timing was fortuitous. The Scottish Government staff had just been given this new responsibility to extend the community right to buy to urban areas, and they were very helpful and co-operative in guiding us through the process. There were a number of stages:

- First of all, we had to let the Church of Scotland know that we were planning to exercise our community's right. They were an unwilling vendor, and there was quite a

lot of suspicion from the church centrally and locally that we were going to interfere with their ability to get a good price for their unwanted asset.

- Then we had to create a vehicle to exercise the right. Friends of Bellfield, which had been hurriedly set up at the Saturday morning meeting, had no legal identity – we had to form a company limited by guarantee, and devise a set of articles and memorandum. This is what became Action Party. AP has a range of powers for community and economic development in Portobello, though at the moment, Bellfield is the main project.
- We then had to define the area of interest. This was a balancing act, because we needed to reach a threshold of support in a local ballot: set the boundaries too wide, and we would have an unreasonable number of signatures to collect; set it too narrow and we ran the risk of being seen as parochial and self-interested. Here's the final area:



- Then here's where the canvassing experience came in. We had to establish that we had the support of 10% of people on the electoral role in the area of interest. These had to be actual signatures collected in person, mostly on the doorstep: any online

mechanism was forbidden. So to have Mary's system and experience was invaluable – but it couldn't have been done without the efforts of a huge number of volunteers.

- At the same time, fundraising was going on. We recognised that building a business case for taking on the building was beyond local volunteer resources. We needed to whittle down the huge number of ideas for the use of the building to a manageable few, and to then build up a case that it was realistic. With a grant from the Scottish Land Fund, we recruited the excellent consultants Urban Animation, who brought together financial, planning and architectural experience. They did a great job, and helped us get to know the building a lot better. They assured us our ambitions were realistic, though this included the rather scary figure that to do all we wanted to do, we would need to raise something in the order of £3 million.
- The next step was to raise the money to buy the buildings – the process required the appointment of two surveyors, one on our side, one for the church. They each presented their case to the District Valuer, and a price of £600,000 was agreed. I think it was at this point that the church realised that going through the right to buy process did not necessarily mean they would lose out financially.
- At the same time, a further ballot was required. Because the right to buy is effectively an intervention into the sacred space of the market, public authorities have to be convinced that it has full public support. That meant that in addition to our own canvass, there was a further formal ballot process, overseen by the Electoral Reform Society. This arrived in a plain brown envelope, and was a stark contrast to all the lively visuals that Bellfield publicity had displayed – it was really boring. Our fear was that it would get binned, so there was a further social media campaign to get the vote out [slide 11]. In the event, the support was of North Korean proportions – on a turnout of 51%, 98.7% voted in favour...



The vision that emerged during this period was clear. Bellfield was to become a community hub, providing affordable meeting and activity space, become a high-quality

arts and social venue, offering opportunities to mark life events including weddings; providing a welcome to all in its gardens and potentially café facilities; and be a place to share Portobello's history and map its future.

Looking back, it now feels that things happened at breakneck speed. The Scottish Land Fund agreed to fund the bulk of the purchase price, and also a limited fund to allow us to employ our own development manager. We carried out a crowdfunding exercise, which met its target of £20,000.

The development manager Emma Griffiths started in August 2017, and on 7 September 2017, the keys were handed over, in a ceremony involving Roseanna Cunningham MSP, Cabinet Secretary for the Environment, whose responsibilities include the Community Right to Buy. Just under 18 months since that first speculative public meeting.



There was still a lot of naivety around. We thought three months would be fine to get things ready, and we would open after the new year. Emma soon discovered how unrealistic this was: taking on an old building means you have to install new systems – not least for fire safety – and there were a lot of other things that needed to be sorted. A delay was agreed, and the public opening was on 23 June 2018, with an all day event, culminating in a wonderful variety show, mostly provided by local talent.

So Bellfield has now been operating as a community hub for around 15 months. The usage is amazing, and income has exceeded budget projections. Action Party don't put on many events themselves – we administer the spaces so that others can use them – from pilates classes to one-off bookings such as the recent Ganesh festival:





Children's parties are a staple of our bookings, and we will have had four weddings by the end of 2019. My Quaker meeting is there on a Sunday; the Edinburgh Youth Theatre has its office, runs classes and workshops for youngsters from pre-school to teens and puts on wonderful performances.



Da Hooley ceilidh band hires the hall four times a year for charity fundraisers; we've had Shooglenifty performing with musicians from Rajasthan; we've had the South London Jazz Orchestra in successive years as part of the Edinburgh Fringe; we've had the flute fling, which brings traditional flautists and whistle players from as far afield as Munich.

Does this meet the community vision from that early meeting? Within the limitations of real life, I believe it does. There are a lot of ideas that haven't been realised, and some will not. The buildings are a fantastic resource, with the wonderful worship space dating back to 1809 alongside very practical 1960s halls. But they have their limitations. Some of these can be tackled as soon as we have the funds – it's vital that we improve the

toilet facilities, for example. Others will take longer – we want the building to be the most accessible of its kind, but there is a one-metre height difference between the floor of the church space and that of the halls, which is not going to be easy to bridge. Others are incompatible – the building cannot simultaneously be a permanent home for local history and heritage, and at the same time be available for the regular and one-off lettings that are our bread and butter.



I just want to end with some reflections about the spiritual dimensions of this journey.

Bellfield was a church – it still looks like a church, inside and out, but it was deconsecrated when the Church of Scotland moved out. Some on the current committee are out-and-out atheists, and were somewhat suspicious of us Quakers when we applied to use it as worship space.

As a Quaker, I subscribe to the view that all places are sacred, and that blessing or consecrating a building is the work of humans rather than of God. Nonetheless, I feel strongly that some places are more conducive than others to a relationship with God, or the things beyond the material. I feel this when I visit Inchcolm in the Firth of Forth, and I feel it in Bellfield.

Part of that is the quiet of the space itself, and its shape – it is a Georgian square rather than a Victorian tunnel. Part of it is the history it holds – I would go there as a parent when the kids from Towerbank had assembly there, and when we took on the building, we found the cradle rolls, which recorded baptisms going back a century, and included names I recognised from my children's contemporaries.

But a large part of it is definitely its role in the community. For me, building faith is about building community, strengthening the bonds between people and breaking down the barriers of misunderstanding that are there in every community. The role Bellfield is playing both strengthens and challenges the community of Portobello. The slogan is *A Place to Be*, and we have been offering the opportunity for all kinds of 'be'-ing. Pilates and Tai Chi promote mindfulness; the music, drama and art that go on promote and display creativity.

Inevitably we ruffle feathers. Sometimes that's about practicalities like late-night noise and competition for scarce parking. Sometimes it's about something more.

Many people who used to worship at the Old Parish regret what they have lost – they are now part of the new amalgamated Portobello & Joppa Parish Church, but they have found it hard to make the move. We need to help people see that their loss is perhaps compensated by a new spirit in the community.

We host events that are not the sort of thing that went on in the old days of the Kirk – there have been two major Hindu celebrations in the last two months, and this weekend we've been taken over by the Lost Maps indie music festival. Largely, these have been welcomed, but I'd be surprised if there are not people who find them a challenge and are suspicious. If we can use the goodwill and credibility we've generated to help build a Portobello that can be open and welcoming to new people and new things, then in my book we're doing the work of the spirit.

