

Red House bothy - the story of a 'pandemic-ed' renovation

It is not known when Ruigh Ealasaid Lodge, more commonly known as the Red House, was built or when it was last occupied (poking around census returns and estate records may tell us more) but Ashie Brebner refers to the use of its near neighbour, Ruigh nan Clach, as an open bothy in the 1950s, so perhaps the Red House was not used as an open bothy until Ruigh nan Clach became too ruinous. Neither property featured high on the Association's wish list, even in the MBA's early years. By the new Millennium, the Red House itself was in very poor condition and its owners posted notices to advise that entry was at your own risk. 15 or so years later, thoughts began to turn to its renovation and use as an open bothy.



Ruigh Ealasaid Lodge in 1895, the five adults unknown Courtesy of Joe Dorward & Ian Brown

The first reference to the renovation project appears in Newsletter 197, Autumn 2016:

A survey has been done on a new project on the Mar Lodge Estate, known as the Red House. The Eastern Highlands and the Estate are keen to see this go ahead, and hopefully, once it is formally adopted by the MBA, work will go ahead next year, once planning etc has been approved.

Formal approval of the proposed renovation project was agreed by the MBA and thoughts were turned into firm proposals, agreed by the owners, the NTS, and the process of obtaining statutory consents was progressed over the next three years and reported in the Eastern Highlands Area's quarterly Area News items in MBA Newsletters - necessary but not exciting stuff for potential renovation volunteers, sometimes a frustration for those involved in the process and finally noted as 'The Red House 'paperwork' is now in place and it's hoped that some work can be completed before the winter weather comes along' in Newsletter 209, Autumn 2019. The Red House was to be renovated and made available as an open bothy with toilet facilities, the first MBA bothy renovation project with a toilet building and toilet to be part of the project's building works.

After three slow years, you can therefore understand the delight of Area Organiser Allan Moore (despite the opening sentence) in being able to report in the next Newsletter, No 210, Winter 2019:

Unfortunately, due to the cold weather the Red House has been put on hold till next year. We had a successful work party to excavate the toilet foundations and we'd hoped to put in the concrete prior to building the blockwork up to ground level before the winter set in but the weather turned much colder and it was decided to wait until next year before any further work was done on site. Some

work will still go ahead in Kenny Freeman's garage over the winter, where the toilet wall frames etc will be fabricated ready for installation next spring.

Few members will have forgotten that the first three months of 2020 marked the start of the Covid pandemic. Frustration levels were ramped up on the renovation project and its volunteers as the mantra throughout the MBA



Andy Mayhew's photograph of the exterior of the renovation project

became 'the government's social distancing requirements prohibit all bothying activity', although there were legally permissible exceptions off-site as Allan was able to write about in the summer 2020 newsletter:

Work on the Red House has been progressing in Kenny Freeman's garage where he's been fabricating the framework for the Toilet Block and it is now ready for transporting to site. The metal stair has also been made by another Eastern Highlands stalwart Andy McNicoll and once the lockdown is over, it will be full steam ahead at the Red House.

Our Winter 2020 Newsletter was able to report the first signs of progress:

The Red House (Ruigh Ealasaid) - Despite the Covid restrictions, work has begun on the toilet block and several low-key work parties have been held. The numbers for this are a maximum of 6 volunteers, so it's been quite a challenge and there is Covid PPE on site as per MBA policy. Each volunteer has their own tent and is self-catering in line with the Covid rules. Despite the restrictions, work has progressed and it's hoped that the toilet block will be wind and watertight for the coming winter, with the work in the bothy being left until next year. Some work has been done with the wall-head foundations being concreted ready for the floor joists. It is hoped that work on the masonry will begin after a bat survey is completed in May next year. We thought this had been done, but apparently not. Due to the small numbers, priority has been given to volunteers with the appropriate skill needed on the day i.e. joiners, builders etc, with the other volunteers being chosen on a rota basis.

The Association has never before been in a position of having to choose its bothy renovation volunteers on a rota basis - the early 2020s were, indeed, strange times. Nevertheless, Allan Moore was happy to report three months later successful completion of the toilet block and its use during the winter months for storage of materials taken to site for the renovation of the bothy building. In the Summer 2021 Newsletter, Allan put pen to paper (or finger to keyboard) to summarise the impact of the Covid restrictions:

Because of the Covid-19 pandemic very little has been done in the Eastern Highlands. Several bothies will hopefully be worked on once the situation has eased off. Due to the restriction in numbers attending work parties, there has been a knock-on effect. With a maximum of 6 volunteers and the need to social distance, we have found it challenging but hopefully things will get back to normal in the not-too-distant future.

The Red House has, however, had several work parties over the last few weeks with the majority of the work being done on the toilet block which, despite the limited numbers able to attend the workparties, is beginning to take shape. Prior to lockdown we had the main structure erected and made weather-proof for over the winter period and are now concentrating on the internal structure which we hope will be well on the way to being completed over the next few weeks. There is also a

bat survey scheduled for mid May. Unfortunately, until this is carried out, no masonry work can be started - but once we get the go-ahead, work can begin on the main bothy renovations. Work has not just been restricted to the toilet block though, and the concrete wall-head was completed prior to the last lockdown with two windows having now been installed during the recent workparties. There have been many offers of help but, again, the maximum of 6 people has had to be adhered to - so I hope you can understand if there are no workparty notifications posted on the website or social media. It will be great though to have our usual number of volunteers - with possibly some new faces - taking part again before too long!

As life began to return to what became a new normal for all our members, work progressed within a safe and healthy framework of arrangements, members being updated in our Autumn 2021 Newsletter (No. 217) as follows:

Red House - There have been several work parties in line with Covid-19 rules. These have been restricted to six volunteers - despite which, there has been real progress made. The toilet block should be operational by now and the main bothy has a temporary floor in place. The stonemason began work in mid August after which work on the rest of the bothy can then go ahead. There are now eight volunteers permitted and that has helped push forward the work. Sadly, the restrictions on numbers has meant that many offers of help have had to be declined which is a pity as so many people have expressed an interest in volunteering.



The completed toilet – John Arnott

In the last Newsletter of 2021, Allan was able to report that the project was now moving forward apace:

Ruigh Ealasaid (Red House) has been progressing well and the stonemason has done a grand job despite the deterioration of the masonry over the last few years. He had been on site for some time and has had to do more work than originally thought, but has now stopped work due to the lowering temperatures being unsuitable for the lime mortar pointing - and will resume work in the Spring. The internal work has been put on hold to allow the mason to progress with the work but the external drainage around the bothy has been completed and the internal joinery work will hopefully be well on the way to completion before the end of the year. Again this will depend on the weather and the track being unaffected by the winter snows

A separate element to Allan's quarterly report indicated the benefits of the bothy at this location, albeit, the renovation was far from complete:

A great time was had at The Red House bothy in October for the annual Bob Scott's Bothy Association and MBA Eastern Highlands Area meetings. With around 30 members in attendance, we were lucky to arrive at the bothy on Saturday to find Kenny Freeman & Abbie Morgan had been busy the previous afternoon, putting up a temporary partition to create a smaller room which was further enhanced by the new stove fitted just days before by resident stonemason, Callum. Thanks to their efforts, what was forecast to be a wet and windy weekend became a much more comfortable stay. During the MBA meeting on Saturday afternoon, two young climbers arrived at the bothy soaked to the bone and likely

well on their way to hypothermia. They had only entered the bothy to find shelter from the wild weather, and found more than a warm welcome. The meeting was quickly halted to make room for them round the fire, with members taking out their gas heaters and allowing the boys to try and dry themselves out. As the meeting continued, they stayed for a couple of hours to dry their gear, warm themselves up and refuel before heading on to Corroir bothy. Late that afternoon, with the weather refusing to pass and the light fading, another couple of young lads from North London landed at the bothy – both of whom had fallen in the swelling river whilst trying to cross. There was a strong wind at this point driven by rain and sleet so as you can imagine they were also soaked through including a sleeping bag. Again, the group rallied round to help them out. Almost immediately a makeshift washing line was installed above the stove and the wet clothes and sleeping bag were dried out over the course of the evening. In the spirit of bothy culture, the boys were welcomed into the group with warmth, food offerings and advice on their next day's travels. They stayed the night and even entertained us with guitar playing and singing, whilst enjoying stories and a dram round the bothy fire. The pair left early on Sunday morning full of thanks, energised by a warm sleep, filled bellies and a dry kit, wading back across the river with a new pair of work gloves and some improvised walking poles courtesy of the workparty. We were able to



watch them cross the river from the bothy and head towards their next stop. They may have fallen in the river but certainly landed on their feet turning up to a cosy bothy! The meetings finished late in the afternoon, and were followed by the usual Eastern Highlands Area entertainment and capers, stories, guitars and singing in the evening - I even saw a bit of dancing! All in all, it was a great weekend and it really is special seeing many friends we've not seen for months, in some cases even years. The evening was concluded with a toast to absent friends – may we meet again soon!

Ellie Kinghorn

In the Spring 2022 Newsletter (No. 219) Allan wrote:

The Red House is progressing slowly but surely - although a planned work party had to be cancelled due to drifting snow on the track making access to the bothy impossible for vehicles. We managed to get to the bothy a few weeks later though and lifted the temporary floor and fitted the underfloor insulation before re-laying the temporary floor.

So it wasn't just coronavirus that delayed progress! As the pandemic restrictions eased, workparties increased in size and frequency, with Allan writing positively in the Summer 2022 Newsletter.

Over the last couple of months the Eastern Highlands have organised several workparties at the Red House, some of which were cancelled due to weather and access problems. We've been beavering away, and the bothy interior is now 80% complete. The temporary floor was lifted and refitted in the attic space to provide storage etc (the attic won't be accessible to the public). The permanent floor has been insulated and laid, along with the ceiling insulation and panelling. The internal walls are also nearing completion and will hopefully be done by the time this report is published. The internal partitions, doors etc will then be installed and the woodwork around the windows finished off. The stone mason is back on site to complete the stonework repairs and pointing which will allow the existing roofing sheets to be removed and the new sheeting fitted. The bothy is now taking shape and should be open for business later this summer. It's been a long demanding project over a number of years with several planning conditions to be met with and the Covid-19 situation hasn't helped due to the restriction in volunteer numbers. A big thank you must go to Kenny Freeman and his helpers who have spent countless hours offsite coordinating and organising the materials required along with the prefabbing of the toilet block in his garage. The Mar Lodge Estate has also been active



May saw work commence on the new roof - appropriately 'red' - Photo: Derek Stewart

with the delivery of materials to site. This has saved many hours of toil for the Eastern Highlands 'Mafia'.

Approaching completion of the project was reported in the Autumn 2022 Newsletter:

We have been concentrating on the Red House which is nearing completion. The new roof is finished and apart from a permanent door on the toilet storage area the toilet is complete and has been operating for several months. This leaves the internal partitions and doors to be fitted and bunk beds built in the sleeping area. The site has been tidied with the removal of excess materials and scaffolding and the landscaping is also nearing completion. The stonemason still has some work to do and hopes to have that finished by the end of August. Again the Eastern Highlands bothies have been in the news with several parties taking refuge in the Red House due to poor navigation and bad weather.

In Newsletter 221, Editor Andy Mayhew gave us a view of progress at the Red House culled from our Facebook site, it makes interesting reading:

Red House diary

Work has been progressing at Ruigh Ealasaid over numerous weekends this year and it's hoped that by the time this Newsletter goes out the bothy will almost be ready to open - please look out for an announcement on our website. Regular progress updates have been posted on social media through the summer, but for those who missed them, here are a few of the reports, comments and pictures taken from our Facebook page - Ed.



The pony on the lime mortar, courtesy of Ian R Mitchell

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12th May 2022 A trip up to The Red House yesterday with Kenny Freeman. Kenny completed glazing two of the four viewing panels of the original Crux Supports dating back to the 1880s as requested by Historic Scotland and the Archaeologists. He also saved a photograph of a pony that was drawn on the original Lime Mortar coating of which some people might class as graffiti but if you blow-up this photo of the pony it will explain why Kenny felt that it should not be covered up. We also started to plane down the fourteen 4m lengths of larch which will be required for the fascia boards when the re-roofing of the corrugated sheeting is complete. However frequent heavy showers of rain/sleet stopped this job so we stored the timber inside the bothy to dry out. We also met Calum and Ben, the two Stonemasons, who have returned to finish of the pointing of the building. They have erected the scaffold on the gable and are now proceeding with the Lime Mortar Pointing. All is going well.

Abbie Morgan

We were grateful the toilets were open for use when we camped nearby on 20th May while we were on TGO22. When we asked for a peek of The Red House we were given a full tour inside and had a lovely chat with some of the volunteers doing all the work. It is going to be beautiful! Well done, and thank you.

Louise Evans

25th May 2022 Went up to the Red House this weekend. Had to go to Corroul on Saturday with Andy to do some jobs, but lots of work got done by the others (and us when we got back). Friday was a wash-out because of the weather, but all the front of the roof got ready with counter-battens, purlings and roof paper on Saturday and we got started with the roof sheets today. Shame we didn't get finished this weekend, but that's weather and roofing jobs for you.

Neil Reid



16th June 2022 Am I the first to arrive by horse to the upgraded Red House? I've stayed there before to find shelter for the horses on our travels - I have to say they grumbled a bit about no longer being allowed inside.... Yogi & Swift are wondering if you are going to build them a new shelter? Thank you

so much for preserving the Highland Pony painting - it was a regular pilgrimage for me. Also many thanks for the most perfectly sized saddle stands. Great job one and all - thank you.

Claire Alldrit

28th June 2022 A lot of time was lost over the weekend due to high winds and driving rain, especially on Sunday when the whole day apart from the first hour in the morning was lost due to the weather. There was also the wind conditions to be taken into account as it was too dangerous to work off the scaffolding and especially the ladders. On Monday the wind had died down and the conditions were drier so we carried on with the work on the roof, managing to finish the fascias on both gables and fixing some of the sections on the roof. Another step in the right direction was achieved by all of the volunteers under challenging conditions. P.S. On the bright side at least there were no midgies!

Abbie Morgan



18th July 2022 The work on the roof is 99% complete with only the fascia on the front of the building to be finished. An amazing effort by all who attended the workparty. A special mention must go to Allan Moore (Sinbad) and 'Lithgae Jim' who made a marvellous job of the fabrication and installation of the lead flashing around both of the chimneys which got us past another landmark on the job, as well as work carried out by Kenny Freeman and Sandy Simpson who finished off fixing the remainder of the ridge sections and then carried on with the installation of the fascias which also have to be sealed to the underside of the corrugated sheeting. They also finished off the panels on the gable-end which allowed us to dismantle all of the scaffolding and load most of it into the trailer for Sandy to take off site. The rest of the guys were busy assisting with raggling the chimneys for the leadwork as well as shifting erecting and dismantling the scaffolding as and where required. Still the front fascia to be installed as well as fair bit of internal work and pathwork to be completed. The bunk beds are to be fabricated

by Robert at his place. Kenny S is also busy making the two internal doors as well as the new front door in his workshop. Well done again to the guys of the Eastern Highlands MBA.

Abbie Morgan

24th July 2022 Another productive weekend at the Red House bothy in the Cairngorms National Park. The flagstone and cobbled path from bothy to toilet was completed, exposed joists and soffits painted, fascia boards fitted on the front of the building and guttering placed over the door. There was also a lot of clearing up work done around the site and scaffolding removed from site. It's looking better every weekend and there's not too much left to do before it's completed.

Neil Reid

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No stone overturned at the original site has been wasted. They have all been utilized in one way or another in the renovation of the building (see pic right - Ed) thanks to the forward thinking of some members of the workparties. Well done all.

Abbie Morgan

Cycled into Red House from Linn o' Dee to see how it's getting on. Great job so far by the Cairngorm's crew. Bothy is in a great spot for some long through walks in the future linking Feshie, Tilt and Lairig Ghru.

Fraser Mackie

22nd August 2022 We got another few jobs done at Red House. A German guy arrived on Friday night, asking if he was at Derry Lodge! He was given a couple of beers and drams and stayed over. Luckily he was going to Corrour bothy the next day so he wasn't too far off. On Sunday morning a Canadian lass came in having camped at Bynack Lodge where she froze all night - but she said that the Scots were the friendliest folk she had met on her travels. Hopefully won't be long until the bothy can get the MBA disc on the door.

Neil Finlay



Almost ready to open!

The end, completion, was within grasp in our Winter 2022 Newsletter:

Our main project at the Red House is nearing completion and by the time you read this the bothy, hopefully, will be finished. Once the completion certificate is issued by the planning authorities it can officially be opened. It's been a long project due to planning regulations and conditions along with the delays caused by Covid. Although the bothy wasn't finished we held a BBQ and ceremony on 15th October in memory of John Arnott and Alex Scott, two good friends of the Eastern Highlands Area. The Estate gifted two rowan trees cultivated on the Estate and John and Alex's families were in attendance at the tree planting in their memory. It was good to see so many people in attendance,

especially Ruth, John's daughter who had travelled up from London. After the tree planting the ceilidh went on to the early hours next morning in true Eastern Highland style.

and happily proclaimed in 2023's first Newsletter of the year:

The Red House completion certificate was issued in late December and the bothy is now officially open and receiving 'rave reviews' for the standard of work and level of comfort provided. A big thanks must go to all the volunteers who gave their time over the years to such a worthy project.

In an October 2022 e-mail about the official Opening Event for the bothy, MBA member Ian R Mitchell confirmed the quality of the renovation, giving his 'rave review' and a small anecdote about Cairngorm bothies as one might expect for a writer of his renown:

I was an invited guest at the opening of the Reid Hoose recently, the quality of restoration is superb and it fills a gap in bothy provision. The gate was open for the high heidys of the National Trust for Scotland I walked, refusing all offers of a lift, in and out, having never done otherwise even when once offered a lift back from Gelder by the Queen.

So much of what became an extended-duration renovation is not reported in our quarterly Newsletters, Allan Moore provides a few more thoughts and recollections.

The Red House was first brought to the attention of the MBA in June 2016 when we first visited to assess the condition of the building. A friend of mine, Willie Forbes, a retired Structural Engineer, did a brief inspection of the building and said that apart from the gables which would require re-pointing and rebuilt where needed, the building had no structural problems and the roof was in reasonable condition. This inspection was the start of the project to turn what was a derelict, unsafe building into a mountain bothy maintained by the MBA. The NTS Mar Lodge Estate previously had plans to renovate the building for their own use but due to the costs involved these were shelved before the building was offered as a bothy to the MBA.

The building known as Ruigh Ealasaid (Elizabeth's Place) is thought to have been built possibly in the 18th century and showed three distinct phases of construction. It was originally built as a cruck framed house (some of the original crucks can still be seen). These were then rebuilt with stone and finally this was again built up to form an upper floor. The outline of the original chimney can still be seen on the North East gable.

It is believed that the building was last occupied in the late 19th/early 20th century before it was abandoned and later used as a bothy, often referred to as the Lower Geldie Lodge. Sadly, over the years the fabric deteriorated due to lack of maintenance until the building became unsafe and was boarded up and safety notices erected to discourage use. What had been a byre or stable had also been demolished and the new toilet sits on the same footprint preserving the original layout of the buildings. (This byre is visible in the first photograph).

Once it was agreed to renovate the building, Bert Barnett got to work drawing up the plans for approval by the Estate before submitting them to the Planning Authorities for Building Warrants etc. This wasn't straightforward as there were many conditions to be addressed before work could go ahead. These included bat reports, archaeological digs, approval from Historic Scotland to name but three, but once everything was in place work began.



One of the final jobs underway

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The work was finally finished and the completion certificate issued in December 2022. From start to finish there have been numerous hurdles to overcome, including the Covid lockdown and restrictions on numbers once we were allowed back on site. Without going into detail, the works would never have been completed if it hadn't been for the support and encouragement from the Eastern Highland members of the MBA. Everyone played their part not only on site but many hours were spent dealing with planning, fabricating structures, ordering and arranging deliveries of materials.

There are too many people to mention, but Bert Barnett and Kenny Freemans' efforts stand out, along with Calum Carruthers the stonemason, and the NTS (Mar Lodge Estate) who delivered the materials to site when needed.

The bothy was finally opened on 15th October 2022 with a ceilidh and tree planting ceremony in memory of Alex Scott and John Arnott, two MBA stalwarts who did so much for the MBA over the years. I have fond memories of Alex and we even managed to get John to the bothy to see the progress made. I can still see him sitting by the track as we worked away. Both families attended the tree planting ceremony with John's daughter Ruth coming all the way from London.

What more can I say but to thank everyone who gave of their time and effort to build what is a wonderful bothy in beautiful surroundings that will provide shelter to many in the years to come.

Allan Moore, MBA Area Organiser, Eastern Highlands, Oct 2023

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