

Mapping Museums project interview transcript

Name: Roy Macintyre and Karen Buchanan

Role: Chair of Trustees (RM) and Curator (KB)

Museum: Gairloch Heritage Museum

Location of interview: meeting room, Gairloch Heritage Museum (original site)

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Interviewer(s): Toby Butler

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The project is based at Birkbeck, University of London. The interview recordings and associated materials are archived at the Bishopsgate Library, London.

For readability the transcript has been made using 'intelligent' transcription (removing ums, ers etc). The interviewee has reviewed this transcript and minor amendments have been made for clarity.

TB: Brilliant, ok we're off. So, if we just start please, if you could just in turn say your name and your date of birth if you don't mind?

KB: My name's Karen Buchanan and my date of birth is XX-XXX 1968.

TB: Thank you.

RM: And my name is Roy Macintyre and my date of birth is XX-XXX 1934.

[0:00:28.2]

TB: Ok that's brilliant, lovely. And could you just both say your roles please, current and past in terms of the museum?

KB: I am the current curator and I've been here since 2013.

TB: Lovely.

RM: And I'm the chairman of the board of trustees which I suppose I've had for about 20 years and before that I was associated with the museum for quite a number of years since it opened in 1977.

[0:00:57.4]

TB: Lovely, ok great. Well let's just start off with a very basic question, can you just tell me the story of how and why it came about, looking back as early as your experience goes really and the initial kind of ideas of what it was for and what the motivation was to do it?

RM: Well the original concept was, as you know by Mrs Murdoch and her husband, she and Sheriff Murdoch and they were the driving force behind it. At that time the building we're in now, I was using as a site establishment for building a community centre because I was a local civil engineer and contractor and I was using this building and when we completed the community centre, the Murdoch's recognised this as a potential place for the idea they had of starting a museum and we'd knocked a door in the gable steading so they had a ready start of access to it and the farmer was agreeable, so they started in a small way and they had the first part of the museum ready for operation in 1977.

[0:02:16.1]

TB: Right, so sorry, did you say that the community centre was built, and they decided to have a part of it as the community centre or, no? Sorry as the museum.

RM: No, there wasn't a connection, it was just a coincidence that the opportunity came, and it was a hard standing where previously it had been a sort of courtyard for the farm, so they got a bit of a flying start for making a very basic sort of establishment.

[0:02:43.5]

TB: Oh, I see, so the hard standing was put down as part of the community centre building?

RM: Well it was part of the sort of site works, that and in connection with the community centre, yes.

[0:02:54.4]

TB: Right I see, so it needed that to have the lorries and the building materials. So therefore, that was possibly a good spot to build something?

RM: Yes, and it was very central in the village so it you know, made a lot of sense to locate here.

[0:03:07.9]

TB: Yes, and what was the feeling at the time about this as an idea from you and perhaps the other people that lived here?

RM: Well they had a group of people who were interested but I don't think at that stage I was interested, I was too occupied getting on with life but you know, some older people were more interested and there was a few colourful characters around including Kay Matheson who had been one of the original group that had stolen the Stone of Destiny from Westminster and she had a lot of folklore and fact and fiction that surrounded her, so she was interested in local history and was a collector in her own right of a lot of material so I think she was one of the committee and there were others that were interested so there was a group that developed the concept of the museum.

[0:04:07.8]

TB: I see, and would you know about when they started to constitute themselves actually as an organisation or a group or was it very informal in the early days?

RM: Well I think they were formalised by 1977 that had been going through various forms of organisation throughout the early 70's, yes.

KB: I think they constituted a couple years before the museum opened.

RM: I think they did, yes.

KB: We have the minutes upstairs so there was the Ross and Cromarty Heritage Trust wasn't there?

RM: Yes.

KB: And they established a local branch of that.

[0:04:46.0]

TB: Oh ok, so there was an existing heritage trust for the whole area?

KB: Yes, for the wider area, yes.

[0:04:50.9]

TB: Right, so this was set up as a branch, ok that's interesting. So, were some of them, well I presume some of them were involved then in that existing trust?

KB: I assume so, yes and in fact I think I mentioned to you we have the minutes here so if you want to have a look through those that will give you an idea of how the Gairloch branch, Gairloch and District branch emerged from the Ross and Cromarty Trust.

RM: Sylvia Murdoch had a friendship with the...

KB: I.F. Grant.

RM: Yes, about the Newtonmore Museum.

KB: Have you come across I.F. Grant?

TB: No.

KB: So, Sylvia mentions her in the interview I did with her and she's a very important character in the independent museums in the Highlands, she set up in a number of different locations what we would now call a folk museum and she did a lot of collecting and preserved the vernacular objects basically. She's also written a well-known book, it's called Highland Folk Ways where she talks about the way that people lived and the objects that they used, but there's a big folk museum at Newtonmore which is now ran by Highlife Highland, it's a local authority museum and that sort of emerged from her original museum which was called Am Fasgadh which means the shelter in Gaelic but she also had another little museum in Iona as well but she collected up here, she collected all over the highlands, and I think the islands too Roy perhaps, maybe to a lesser extent?

RM: I think so, yes.

KB: But she's a really important figure and she was a doctor of philosophy and Sylvia had met her in Edinburgh I believe, she'd taken classes under her in Edinburgh so that was an influencing factor as well.

[0:06:53.2]

TB: Oh, that's fascinating, so she was collecting folklore memories, objects or?

KB: Yes, I think she was very much material culture based is my understanding but yes, she's a very important collector and still widely remembered and respected throughout the Highlands for that.

[0:07:15.4]

TB: Ok well maybe just generally, at that time - so this would have been the late 60's I suppose - was there kind of a burgeoning interest in Gaelic culture and capturing some of this and if so, why then do you think?

RM: Why then? Well I think people like Kay were sort of resurrecting an interest in Gaelic culture, it was particularly song and dance as much as anything else, but also social history and that was certainly part of it you know, part of the artefacts and people were also recognising that artefacts shouldn't all be thrown out. I mean I think after the war there was a great clear out of stuff from old houses and people weren't keeping anything, it was a generation of people who threw anything out and then there was a realisation that some of it should be preserved and I think we probably missed out a lot of things but on the other hand it's quite surprising the number of artefacts we have saved.

KB: There was a big Gaelic renaissance certainly in the 50's in the central belt really it was Gaelic emigrants from the Highlands and Islands and there was a resurgence in Gaelic poetry so poets like Sorley MacLean and Iain Crichton Smith and Derek Thompson, and Kay of course had been to university in Glasgow and I suspect came back sort of full of that love of Gaelic and an understanding of how important the Gaelic that still existed here actually was, that the people who had been here all their lives didn't appreciate.

[0:09:06.1]

TB: I see, yes. I understand that with the clearances some of the people got pushed from the centre to the seaside you know, and of course migrating beyond that but I haven't seen the exhibition obviously. So, is the culture that's been captured here, are these sort of the stories of people that have moved from somewhere to here or is it much more rooted in the seaside communities?

KB: Yes so in this area, clearances were not common, there were some in the sort of other parts of the parish in Letterewe and in Gruinard but the majority of the parish wasn't cleared and in fact the owners of the Gairloch Estate who are still the owners and have been since the late 1400's were very much of the view that the land could be improved to support the population and tried to encourage, well they...

RM: To modernise the culture.

KB: Yes, they encouraged people to modernise but they also re-drew the map so that they made more agricultural land available to the Crofters, with the result that there wasn't the same pressure on land here as there was in the areas where people were being cleared to the coast and you know, to little narrow strips of very poor land, that wasn't the case here. So, the answer to your question is that the indigenous population here is a population that has been here for as long as we know really, and you only have to look at the number of Mackenzie's that are still here to see that and the community of incomers is a much more recent...

RM: Phenomenon.

KB: Phenomenon, yes.

RM: Yes, a lot of the people did emigrate from here, you know apart from that, but it was more of a willing emigration than a forced one, like it was in other parts of the Highlands.

[0:11:22.5]

TB: So, tell me about, because you mentioned the newcomer community as it were, or the incoming community, when did that start would you say?

RM: Well I think it started with more apparent in I would say the 70's and 80's and it's partly because it's the type of place to retire to so retirees could see the attractions of coming here to live in the latter part of their lives so that was something that grew and grew and I mean, it reaches a point when it may be slightly distorts the demographics of a district if it's not controlled. It's never been controlled but it certainly becomes apparent and steps need to be taken to address it.

[0:12:19.2]

TB: I see what you mean, right so we're not talking about young hippies in the 60's now, it was more of a retirement community?

RM: Well there was a spell when the hippies came to places like Torridon, I mean there was an abandoned village just north from here which got revived by hippies and now the second or

third generation of those people are very law abiding and are part of the community, but it's maybe taken two generations to reach that point.

TB: I see.

KB: It's still a bit off-grid though isn't it?

RM: It's a little bit but much less than it used to be. I mean at the start it was a no-go area but now you're very welcome there, yes.

[0:13:01.4]

TB: Yes, that's lovely. Ok, so I've got a sense that we've got some local people that are interested in setting up the museum and it seems to be that the motivation was really connected to Gaelic and folk culture and so on. In those earlier days, what sort of people were involved? Were they working, were they retired?

RM: Well I think the Sheriff had a great ability of slightly persuading you to do things and he looked at people with resources, I mean I was you know an engineer and building contractor and I had resources at my disposal so I was a good soft touch to get interested because you know, they didn't have a lot of money and when he wanted to move things like boats, I mean I had machines so he would ask me if I could do it and you know you daren't ask for money because they didn't have any money so you just did what you could.

TB: I see, yes.

RM: And that generated an interest and I mean I wasn't the only one, he persuaded lots of people to do things to help.

[0:14:12.6]

TB: So, were these mostly professionals?

RM: Well most professional and working people you know labourers helped and give whatever skills they had to offer, and I think he got a lot of it done in kind rather than you know, rather than costing. Although they did certain things that obviously they had to charge something for because there was quite a lot of resources involved and you know things like when the light was taken out of the lighthouse, the work involved in that was considerable and we went and we set it up and it must have taken the best part of four or five years to achieve it but eventually we had reassembled thinking it would never have to move it again and now we're moving it to the new museum.

[0:15:03.1]

TB: Amazing. Well that's interesting, so all this work and resources are basically being channelled towards building a building, right? Is that what we're talking about?

RM: Well I think both building a building and collecting but they did also have people come in and giving talks and lectures and so on so it was not just a building, there was a sort of whole interest and the other person that appeared on the scene was a fellow board of London called Roy Wentworth, he was a student who was sort of drifting around and finding somewhere to settle down, he came to Gairloch and just worked in local hotels but obviously he was a bright fellow and he ended up marrying a local girl from a Gaelic family, he got very interested in Gaelic, he lived with an old couple first of all and then with this girls, his wife's family, learnt Gaelic and eventually he went off to Aberdeen University and did a post graduate degree and became a doctor of literature was he?

KB: Posthumously yes, sadly he died quite young.

RM: Died young but he's left...

KB: He has left a legacy both in the museum and beyond, he's a very well-respected guy.

RM: And he was our first curator here, the Sheriff recognised his potential and it became a career. He was more of a sort of dreamer and so on and his writings are brilliant, he wasn't a very practical fellow so the Sheriff eventually got a bit fed up of him because I remember he said to me one time that he couldn't change a lightbulb although he had all these other talents.

[0:17:03.3]

TB: Yes, well that's amazing, right so that's fascinating that an incomer should come in but get so immersed in the culture.

RM: Yes, a cockney he was.

TB: Really?

RM: Yes.

TB: Gosh that's amazing.

RM: Amazing, yes.

KB: He was absolutely evangelical about Gaelic, so all of his research notes here are written in Gaelic and this enormous dictionary is his work.

[0:17:26.6]

TB: Oh yes, the Gaelic Words and Phrases of Wester Ross?

KB: Wester Ross, yes. So, it's very much the vernacular Gaelic and he spent a lot of time just studying.

RM: He got accustomed with Gaelic and he followed a lot of campaigns you know, and some of them quite controversial, like not paying his council tax until they would produce a form in Gaelic, the council, yes.

[0:17:50.9]

TB: Oh really, right, quite radical, brilliant, how interesting. So, this strikes me as quite strong characters aren't, they, that are kind of coming in and getting involved which is interesting.

RM: I think that's what drives it on, yes.

TB: Yes, and organisationally how did it work? Was it a committee or did you have like a membership or friends or all that kind of stuff? Or was it much more informal?

RM: No the Sheriff with his background, he was a very formal fellow and all the legalities were, you know he held very disciplined AGMs and committee meetings and the minutes are well recorded, but we were, we formed ourselves as trustees I think somewhere in the early 90's because legislation was sort of toughening up and then more recently we've had to reform ourselves as a company limited by guarantee and that's to satisfy funders like the lottery and other charitable organisations as well.

[0:18:58.6]

TB: I see, right ok so it has changed a little bit, organisationally over the years?

RM: It has changed over the years and we're now a company limited by guarantee, yes.

[0:19:06.1]

TB: Ok lovely and just to, the early days, where did the money come from because presumably you did need some of that?

RM: Yes, I think we were fortunate here because before the Highland Council was constituted in 1995, there had been, it was a two-tier local authority in Scotland and they had what was called district councils and if one looks back now, the Ross and Cromarty District Council was

by a long way the most forward looking district council in the north of Scotland. So Ross and Cromarty had developed support for independent museums and they gave grants and the grant we got in the early 90's is larger than the grant we get now and when Highland Council was constituted in 1995, there was a sort of rationalisation across the Highlands and a great debate about whether it should be evened out down the way or evened up to Ross and Cromarty standards and its ended up unfortunately down the way so we now get a grant from the council which enables us to employ a curator of about half the amount we used to get in the 1990's.

[0:20:40.1]

TB: Really, right it's gone down that much. But you were getting annual funding?

RM: From about the 90's, I think prior to that we probably got smaller one-off grants.

KB: Sylvia also mentions that the restaurant was bringing in money to support the museum.

RM: Yes, they started a restaurant in the legacy of the steading building here.

TB: Oh really? Yes.

RM: Yes, and then later on there was a slight change of ownership, or at least of usage; and the restaurant was separated from the museum.

KB: But you can see on the sign outside, which I think is the original sign, it says 'Taigh tasgaidh Ghearrloch' and in the Gaelic it says 'food for body and mind' [biadh dhan chorp's dhan inntinn], so it's the restaurant and the heritage.

[0:21:32.8]

TB: Oh, I see, that's lovely. Well that's interesting so originally the restaurant was set up by the museum really to keep income coming in, but then it got, presumably it was leased out then to someone else to run at some point, is that how it worked?

RM: Well the whole building was always leased; we never owned this building.

[0:21:49.0]

TB: Oh really? Who was it leased from?

RM: From the farmer.

TB: Oh, I see, right ok. So, this building, I'm looking at it, so it wasn't, ok was there actually any sort of building before this idea came about?

RM: There was a farm steading.

KB: A barn.

[0:22:04.0]

TB: I see, so it was improved rather than built from?

RM: Yes, yes.

TB: Ok.

KB: And the farmhouse is across the road on the other side of the road.

[0:22:12.2]

TB: Right, so the actual museum was in a barn, ok. And so, did you build anything?

RM: Yes, where we're sitting here was a little addition, this was our library and the other erection we built the lighthouse but the rest of it was a conversion and a pretty basic conversion you know.

[0:22:31.6]

TB: Ok and the initial, so it sounds to me like probably the initial start-up funds given the position of Sheriff was probably local kind of government funding to get the thing going. Then you've got income from the restaurant and also a grant which is I imagine...

RM: Yes, and we charged admissions at the door.

TB: I was going to ask about that, so what about tickets? Did you charge from the beginning?

RM: Yes.

TB: Yes, ok and so there's also income from that?

RM: Yes.

[0:22:55.8]

TB: And how much do you charge now?

KB: Four pounds although it will go up in the new building, but until now, until last year it was four for adults, three for seniors and a pound for children.

[0:23:07.7]

TB: Ok, yes good. And just give me a sense of your visitor figures of the years?

KB: Yes, well they've gone from about - I don't know what they were when we first started...

RM: They rose gradually to reach a peak about 1990 of about 18,000 and then there was a long slow decline which we took various steps to address at various times, it became an issue, but you know holiday patterns were changing. I mean through the 60's and 70's here the holiday industry was bed and breakfast of big hotels and there were also people who came and took holiday houses for a month and that pattern all changed dramatically and tourism, for a while suffered quite badly so the 18,000 went down in the early 00's and the last decade...

KB: Until 2013 and it was back to just over 5,000 and it's gone up to seven.

RM: 5,000 and now it's gone back up to seven, yes and we think there's quite a potential with our new building to really double these figures because we're not well located here, we're right on a road junction, people are passing through and there's much more of that nowadays of passing through traffic, so people passing through are too concerned with a difficult junction to spot the museum. In our new building we're much better positioned for people to have advance notice of coming to a museum, so I think it's a much better location.

[0:24:53.1]

TB: So where is the location, on the main road still but further that way?

RM: It's about three or four hundred yards that way.

KB: You have to pass it on your way in.

TB: Oh really, ok

KB: It's a big shiny white new-looking building.

[0:25:06.0]

TB: Yes great, ok. Well before we go onto that, because that's obviously a really important part of the story, we've talked about to set things up you need a building which you had obviously on lease from the farmer, you need money, we talked about that but you also need objects so let's just talk about the objects and just you know, where did they come from and how did that sort of develop?

RM: I think in the early days there were more sort of small objects but gradually people began to think of bigger things we had some big things like the Preachers Ark.

TB: Sorry, the?

RM: Preachers Ark.

KB: It's an outdoor pulpit.

RM: Preachers Ark, it's a bit like a box that you'd see a Punch and Judy show in, you know a very basic sort of garage shed but with an opening, and these were used at the time of the disruption you know when they were thrown out of their established churches and people had to have outdoor worship, so they sort of got little boxes, they didn't have Ikea to go and get the kit but it looks a wee bit like that of the 18th Century and we have one very original one which is quite a treasure now because there aren't many of them around. But we also have the crossed house artefacts.

KB: Yes and if you look at Sylvia's transcript she talks about how Kay was very good at getting people, Kay Matheson and how they held when they had the trust, before the museum was open, they used to hold these evenings where they'd get people to bring stuff along and talk about it and they just approached the community and asked them when they decided to set up the museum to bring stuff along and they ended up with lots of rubbish and some really nice things. But one thing she says that is interesting, I think is that people were a bit cautious about giving stuff because they felt that they were maybe making fun of them because Sylvia and her husband will have been very well educated people and well to do and there was a fear that they were sort of mocking people for having these antiquated objects and sometimes they'd go to get the objects and they'd have thrown them on the bonfire and that was the reason that Sylvia felt that they were doing that.

RM: Diplomacy was required.

KB: And so perhaps Kay was a better collector in that sense because she was from the area and knew everyone but also appreciated the value of these objects. And of course there had been, even before this museum, there had been a very small museum called Barbel's which is just means Barbara's House and it was a house that was down on the shore, and it was an old croft house where it was just like a heimat museum you know, one house set out as it originally would have been.

RM: This was in the 1930's, yes.

KB: And that closed and I think maybe some objects might have gone to I.F Grant from there as well, so there had been some collecting even before that as well, but I mean if you look at our accessions register I think until I arrived in 2013, I don't think we'd purchased a single object, it was all donations and they are a combination of donations of sort of vernacular tools and whatever from local people, but also some of the fancier stuff has come from the big house, from the Mackenzie's of Gairloch. We now have been collecting more actively I would say, partly because of the new displays that we've been putting up as well, so we are starting to purchase stuff more often when we can afford it, I actually have an annual acquisitions budget now and we're also, particularly in the new building, going to be able to take stuff on loan so we're looking to get stuff. In fact, we have agreed that objects will come back to the area from other museums, including the National Museum of Scotland which left the area quite a long time ago.

[0:29:38.9]

TB: **Oh fantastic, so the new building I assume, it will have optimal conditions for that kind of thing?**

KB: Yes it is of a standard that they will agree to lend to us, yes.

[0:29:46.7]

TB: **Wonderful, yes how exciting. And with your accession budget I guess you identified areas that you particularly wanted to fill; can you just give me a sense of where you felt there were some gaps that you needed to?**

KB: Well yes, I think one area which I'm interested in is textiles, and we had a company, a small company called Kirk Hand weave which closed in maybe the 90's Roy? Or maybe the 80's?

RM: No, maybe early 80's or late 70's I would think, yes.

KB: So, there were a lot of high quality, handmade textiles but also pottery and things like that which came out of there which I would like to have a lot more of in the collection, we have very little from there and I think that's a shame. Also, just contemporary collecting as well, you know our collection kind of stopped, in fact when I arrived the previous curator told me she had stopped collecting because the building was full, and she couldn't fit anymore objects in and that was another reason we needed a new building. So, our collection had become quite static and I have been taking more contemporary objects, and I also recently collected a Wester Ross bicycle for example, that was made in the 80's in a small factory in Aultbea that was funded by the Highland and Islands development board so yes, things like

that. It's all about the parish, things that were made here or was used here and I do think we need to bring the collection more up to date now as well.

[0:31:31.2]

TB: Yes, was the parish always the focus in terms of the idea?

RM: The collection, yes.

TB: Why the parish and not just the town?

RM: Well I think Gairloch parish is one of the biggest in Scotland and it was always that sort of self-contained area, I think because of the physical nature of the landscape, you know we're surrounded by mountains so we're kind of cut off from the rest of the world by a ring of mountains on one side and the sea on the other side so it's a very distinct area.

KB: There's also the issue of land ownerships, so the Mackenzie's were at one point owned the whole parish.

TB: Oh really, I see, ok.

KB: And although, I mean for example although we're 12 miles from Aultbea which in any other terms it would be another town or another area, there's actually a really close relationship between all of the towns here because we're so remote from anywhere else.

TB: I see, yes.

RM: Another thing that's worth mentioning about the early part of the museum is that in the 19th century there was a fellow here called Dixon, who wasn't local here he came to live here, he'd been the town clerk of Wakefield in Yorkshire and I think for health reasons he was obliged to come to the Highlands and he bought an estate here and he must have been a man of means but he got assimilated into the upper strata of society here, he lived in Loch Maree and he became very, very knowledgeable about natural history, social history and all aspects of life here and played a prominent part. Now in 1886 he wrote a book called Gairloch and a Guide to Loch Maree it was called, and it was really to inform visitors to the parish and it's a brilliant book, it must be one of the best social histories written about a Highland parish. Well one of the early things that it did when the museum was started here was, they republished that book which hadn't been published from its early beginnings until 1970, they arranged a re-print and one of the early revenues for the museum was the sales of that book and we still do that today, we're now at our third re-print. It's a marvellous book, tremendous social history and a lot of the information that has been gleaned for the museum has been from Dixon's book and we have copies of it here.

TB: Oh, fantastic I'll have to get a copy.

KB: That's one of the re-prints.

RM: That's a re-print.

TB: Oh gosh its lovely.

RM: It's a tremendously interesting book by any standards,

[0:34:42.4]

TB: Fabulous. And just, because tourism goes way back then doesn't it of course.

KB: To the Victorian period, yes.

TB: It's always been a big deal. I'm just wondering whether with those early years, whether tourism and bringing people to the area and making them stay for a bit longer, was that almost part of the thinking as well as?

RM: Well yes visitor attraction was a big part, yes part of the concept.

[0:35:10.9]

TB: I see, ok yes. Well that's lovely so I think I've got a good picture of the early development, and so we've come to the stage where the museum is kind of full, it's successful and you've got a number of revenue streams which mean you can employ a curator which is incredibly unusual for most small museums and your figures are astonishing, I mean 18,000 for a paid museum, that is incredible, honestly, really impressive comparatively. 10,000 is really good for any sort of museum of this size so it's doing brilliantly. At some point you decided that it needs to expand so just tell me about that and how and where that kind of came about. you've mentioned a little bit of this but...

RM: Well there was a difficulty with the lease, and I don't think it's worth going into the personal details but the long and short of it was that we couldn't renew the lease, we tried and failed over a decade and thought we had achieved it, but we didn't. In tandem with that we were going to bodies like the Highland and Island Board and other bodies to see if we could get money to upgrade the premises because although we had relatively recently achieved accreditation, our curators were always telling us that you know we had to do something about the building because environmental conditions were not ideal, you know it's a cold place in the winter and in the summer the humidity at times of the year is a problem, so we really had to upgrade and having achieved accreditation the pressure was on us even more. So we had to do something and we spent probably more time than we should trying to

renegotiate the lease but it reached the point where we said well we're getting nowhere here, we're going to look around and we went through a process with Heritage Lottery where they, I think you could only regard them in the early stages as being not encouraging, they were doing their best to tell us to modify ourselves and be sensible but at the same time telling us we didn't need to improve things. So, it was a difficult situation and we weren't making progress, so we had to grasp the situation firmly by ourselves and decide well we jolly well are going to do something, eventually they said well you have to do a proper appraisal...

KB: Options appraisal.

RM: Options appraisal to see what, to show us that what you're thinking about is the best [unclear 0:37:59.3] and that there are no other alternatives, which we did and then persuaded them I don't know, can you put dates on this Karen?

KB: Well when I arrived in 2013 the stage one lottery application had gone in and then we heard not long after I arrived that it had been unsuccessful and some of the trustees met with the lottery and sort of re-evaluated what we needed to do to be successful and I think it was another 18 months before we actually put another application in and then in yes, so it was December 2014 I think our application went in. So, you know, this has been going on for quite some times, I think 10 years before I came and the six years I have been here, the board has been working towards this.

RM: And I think if we had thought that it would take us until 2019, I think we'd have [unclear 0:38:58.7].

TB: Yes.

KB: But without it the museum just simply wouldn't have survived because there's no potential for growth in this building and with the Highland Council income stream just diminishing all the time, we need to find other sources of revenue and it just couldn't happen in this building unless we owned it or had a long-term lease so we could actually do something with it. So, there were many, many reasons why we had to either move or forget about it basically.

TB: **Wow, ok sure.**

KB: But the board has been extremely tenacious and courageous I think as well in pursuing this goal and really taking a lot of risks along the way as well and you know, I think there were a lot of people in the community who thought it would never happen, it was simply too ambitious a goal for a community of this size and they've proved them wrong.

[0:39:49.6]

TB: Wow, and so in the end when it was successful, what were the objections that you met with your resubmission? What was the problem?

KB: Well there were two main problems as I remember and one was a footfall in the building of what the lottery call value for money and that is in the Highlands, it's just very difficult to achieve the same level of value for money as they measure it as you can in more populated areas, so they're looking at the number of people who are benefiting directly from their investment and we just, you know we're not densely populated up here, we don't have a lot of ethnic minorities or socially or economically deprived so it's difficult to tick a lot of those boxes. But, on the other hand our nearest local museum is 75 miles away so if this museum is not here, this becomes a culturally deprived area so we really had to fight that corner and we also were asked to look at partnerships as well, developing partnerships and we were fortunate that we had been able to develop a partnership with the local branch of the University of the Highlands and Islands so West Highland College have a learning centre in Gairloch and they were interested in using our premises and I think becoming more integrated with the museum as well that would open up a new subject option for their students for example.

[0:41:30.7]

TB: Great, so you could deliver those things?

KB: Yes.

RM: So, we had a pretty rigorous business plan for the lottery and like all business plans there's a lot of crystal ball gazing in there and you know we have to have the confidence that what we have projected will come to pass and you know, that's quite a big challenge so that's the stage we're at right now.

[0:41:59.0]

TB: Yes, absolutely. And how much was the bid for if you don't mind me asking?

RM: To the lottery?

TB: Yes.

RM: Well our project is 1.8 million plus...

KB: The building project is 1.8 and then there are activities and other things on top of that, that take it to about 2.4.

RM: 2.3, 2.4.

KB: And of that, £770,000 is from the lottery.

RM: The amount from the lottery is £725,000 or something.

KB: Yes in that region, about a third of the total cost.

[0:42:30.7]

TB: So, where's the other two thirds coming from?

RM: Well we have 23 funders and we were challenged with raising £200,000 locally just by local divisions which we achieved.

TB: That's astonishing.

KB: It is astonishing, it's about £200 per person in the parish so it's a huge achievement.

[0:42:52.5]

TB: How did you do that? Events and stuff or?

RM: Events, but also donations.

KB: Yes, we had private individuals making very generous donations.

[0:42:59.8]

TB: That's amazing, but the other big, big funders I presume the local government have got involved?

RM: The biggest ones are national lottery...

KB: Scottish Government.

RM: Scottish Government funding yes, the Highland Council was very helpful in brokering some of those like the derelict land fund. The building that we're moving into is quite an interesting building because it was probably the ugliest building in Gairloch, it was an old, it was a bunker that was built not in the wartime but in 1950 when the threat of other nations from the East was very potent and it would have been funded probably with American NATO money, it was called the AAOR which stands for Anti-Aircraft Operating Room and it was one of those buildings which are often underground, although ours was on the surface where there's a big atrium and a table and the boss would have been pushing battleships around in

the North Atlantic if it had ever done anything. So, it was built as a sort of nuclear proof bunker with walls two feet thick, but it never ever did anything in anger or actively and it lay there. So some years later around 1960, the Highland Council took it over as a Council Roads Depot and they knocked a big hole in one of the gables and made it into a garage and so it lasted in the middle of the village for the next 30 years, and just about 10 years ago they decided with the reorganisation of the local government that they were abandoning the place and there was talk of knocking it down so we persuaded them to give it to us. They valued it at £70,000 but they gave it to us for £1, so the £70,000 went towards our project cost.

TB: That's amazing.

RM: So, we've converted what was probably the ugliest building in the village to what potentially is the most beautiful building in the village now.

[0:45:23.7]

TB: Yes how fabulous. You mentioned there about government reorganisation making that available, that was quite recently, so it was '95 that there was reorganisation?

RM: Yes.

TB: And then there was another one more recently?

RM: Well it's not a reorganisation, it's just a reorganisation of the way the local authority operates. I mean one of the disappointing things to me is that local governments are becoming more and more centralised, we now have Police Scotland who we used to have original police, we have the fire service is centralised, the local authorities are more and more centralised, so we don't have the infrastructure in the more remote districts that we once had.

TB: Yes, I see.

RM: I mean at one time we had our own surveyor here but now we don't know who is in charge of it in the Highlands.

[0:46:15.1]

TB: It's interesting because a lot of local history museums are - well some anyway that I've spoken to - they are in buildings that have become available at these moments of reorganisation, where councils pull out and you're left with these kind of civic things which need to be filled with something and a museum is often a good possibility.

KB: I know that's becoming problematic now too because the buildings are deteriorating, and the museums don't have the funding to repair them and recently Caithness Horizons had closed for pretty much that reason.

TB: **I've just spoke to them about that, yes it was an appalling situation really where although that was an example of a lot of funding going in, in a similar way to this, a couple of million pounds or whatever but the business plan, you know well there were lots of issues with it and it was quite complex but one of them was visitor numbers and you know, how realistic kind of they were. But your visitor numbers, I mean I think their visitor numbers were similar to yours actually, they were four or five thousand towards the end.**

KB: But then Highland Council was also expecting them to maintain a historic building as part of their business plan and it just isn't realistic.

TB: **Yes, that's right because they had to pay for the heating and lighting, everything.**

KB: Well they would have had to, until now they've received additional funding for it, but Highland Council's new business model was that they would half what they were giving them, and the shortfall was just too, wasn't sustainable.

[0:47:46.3]

TB: **Right, yes, I see what you mean. So, did you have a similar kind of, well you mentioned that you had your grant cut here as well didn't you?**

KB: Yes, but gradually, so it's now about 6,000 a year and I think it was about 18,000 a year at one point and of course salaries go up and the grant goes down and you have to find other ways of finding money. But you know, I think until the problems with the building are, we got to a stage where we were almost at capacity in this building but we have managed to hold our own, I don't think we've had a year in the red yet as far as I know, we're not making money but we're not losing money so I think considering even how much the grant has gone down since I was here, it was about 12,000 I think when I arrived and it's halved in the last six years, and of course things electricity, everything is more expensive. But I think other independent museums from their origins have had to be self-sufficient, they're actually a lot better at this than the local authority museums are and I think museums you know, like Inverness or even like Caithness Horizons which has historically had a much bigger grant now that these cuts are becoming so severe, they're the ones who are suffering most because they don't have that entrepreneurship built into the system that the independent museums have always had to have.

[0:49:15.7]

TB: I see yes, that's a really interesting thought, yes. And so, well you've partly just answered this, but what makes you so resilient, you know you mentioned some entrepreneurial spirit but can you kind of perhaps expand on how it is that you survived for so long because it's pretty amazing?

KB: Well I think we're pretty adaptable for a start, as an independent you can be adaptable, you know you can if you need a job done you can go and ask somebody and get it done tomorrow, whereas if you're in the council you'd have to fill out 16 forms and it might be a month before you could actually get it sorted out, so I think that's one reason we are resilient. We also as Roy mentioned, there's quite a lot of retirees coming to live here and very many of them are very interesting and talented people who've had really you know spectacular careers elsewhere and so we have a fantastic skills base to draw on for our volunteers as well.

RM: Yes, I mean we are at a moment of, you know a challenging moment right now because our new business model is going to be quite different, I mean apart from the University of the Highlands that Karen mentioned being one of our tenants in the new building, we also have a retail unit and a cafe which we hope are going to produce income streams, so it will be a completely different model from the one we have here which, if it works out will be income generating but that remains to be realised yet, I mean we're just at a very important time in our history at the moment.

[0:51:00.5]

TB: That's interesting. What was your business model before then?

RM: Well our business model had to be adaptable, I mean as Karen said for a time it was a museum, our income came from admissions, from donations, from the cafe...

KB: Retail.

RM: And retail. We've had over the last 10 years, because we lost the cafe we've had to be as innovative as we could with the retail and the retail, I think has improved in the last 10 years, we've got quite a reputation for books for instance and now we've found other ways of generating income you know, from all sorts of things like...

KB: Pub quizzes, we have a pub quiz league now that we ran over the winter and it raised almost £3,000 this year.

TB: Wow ok.

RM: Yes, pub quizzes are a good revenue, we've also had local gardens where we've hosted you know the big public openings of the gardens so that gives us money, we've had lecturers that have given us...

KB: Yes, we have regular talks which bring in donations.

RM: So, we're probably going to have to be more innovative in the new building to create the wealth that we require to keep us going.

KB: But we also have much more potential you know, and greater opportunities in the new building.

[0:52:30.6]

TB: Well yes, so I imagine there's going to be more space, right?

RM: A lot more space.

KB: A lot more space, yes.

TB: And just give me a sense of how it's going to go, so have you decided so it's multi-use, can you move things around or?

KB: Yes, the big room we have for activities will be flexible and multi-purpose space.

[0:52:49.0]

TB: Great, great, can't wait to see it. Ok let me just check, we've covered such a lot which is brilliant. Ok so with this new design then, I mean just tell me about kind of, I mean clearly the existing museum, it looked wonderful and thank you for the photos you sent it looked really rich and you know, just one of those museums that's got lots and lots in it, it's like a treasure trove isn't it? Will you be keeping that kind of character or is it going to change? And if it's going to change will you be modelling it on something or? Just give me a sense of your thoughts about the actual display kind of, sort of thing.

KB: Well it was very important to us to keep some aspect of the old building and a lot of people said you know it's got this wonderful, couthie atmosphere, the new building won't be the same and so we have done our best to make sure that it isn't a huge step change, but of course it's a completely different building, it's a very industrial building and we have to aim to be at the sort of cutting edge of museum displays and not just in terms of the visual but the environmental conditions and all the rest of it as well. But from the start we had aimed to have as much of the collection on open display as possible which we always had here and which was popular and we had also always planned to have some area of the museum that

kept these dioramas or it's really the wrong word but the kind of replica craft house, the replica schoolhouse. So those are all still there in one particular area of the museum and they don't sit in the new building quite as well as they sit in here because it's a very different building.

RM: So, they're sort of individual exhibits there.

KB: Yes but they're also not finished yet so I think we just need to give it time and see what they look like, but we will still have that kind of richness in some areas, particular the upstairs galleries have lots of open display objects, whereas downstairs we've moved much more towards having the archaeology and the treasures if you like in a you know, big, dramatic display and we have our lighthouse lens down there which is also a really impressive object. But also bringing out the oral history collections as well which I think was one of the key things we wanted to do, so it's not the same museum but hopefully it's the same museum with added value.

RM: Yes and I think there's two areas we've tried our best to improve, I mean one the geology and natural history because this area has a tremendous part to play in the development of the geology of the UK and in fact geology in general you know, because it was where some of the cutting edge discoveries were made in the 19th century and some of the real big figures of geology of the time like Peach and Home of the Geological Survey and a few others that did some of their basic fieldwork around here. So, we're making much more of the geology display and we're also making much more of what's called the three world wars, which is the First World War, the Second World War, the Cold War and we have a new display that's you know, dedicated to that.

KB: And which talks about the building as well.

TB: Yes, I was going to say the Cold War would be brilliant in that respect yes, really interesting.

RM: Yes so these are new aspects of the museum which we are hoping will give us, because we have been subject to a lot of you know minor criticism about why on earth are you leaving here, you've got such a fantastic museum, why are you going somewhere else? Well we know the answer to that but as Karen said, there's been a great sort of pressure to keep some of the aspects of this place that has brought us over the years tremendous comments in our visitors book. I mean our visitors books are amazing aren't they with positive comments that say best ever museum and so on.

[0:57:21.7]

TB: And also of course as far as the community are concerned, it's their stuff like they're the ones that gave it to you so it's a big deal isn't it when it starts to be kind of moved and messed with and I can imagine that's quite a sensitive thing to deal with.

RM: I mean a lot of people who don't know better say why on earth are we leaving here.

KB: However, I think there is now building excitement about the new museum opening and now that they've seen what we've done with that place, because as Roy said it was just such a horrible building previously and it looks fantastic now and there is a great excitement building for that, I think.

[INTERRUPTION]

TB: I paused it and I didn't press record again, I'm so sorry that was so good. I'm going to ask the question again because it's so important what you just said then.

RM: I don't know if I can remember now.

[0:58:18.9]

TB: Well honestly that was lovely, ok so I'll just ask the question again. So, we were just talking about what is it about change that is so important to you especially in the museum and could you just make that point again?

RM: Yes, well I was just saying that the you know, if I take my grandchildren now, they are almost as knowledgeable as our equivalents in a city because of the modern communications of internet and television and so on, they're much better informed. If you go back to when I was a child, we were living in isolated communities and we weren't really as streetwise, we had to learn that when we went off to secondary school or university and so that's changed in a huge way over the last century or century and a half.

TB: You said something which I thought was really lovely was that a child here in Gairloch would be very different from a child in London or Manchester in the 50's but now that's not so much the case.

RM: Now that's less noticeable.

TB: They're more uniform.

RM: They're more uniform, yes.

[0:59:47.2]

TB: So, what we're seeing here is a massive challenge to localism, to local culture, to local difference and this is of course all over the world and all over the country. So, I hadn't thought of this, but this could be why there's such a boom in local museums.

RM: It could be.

TB: Because these localisms are being threatened over this period, you know from the 50's onwards, that is being attacked so people are sort of needing to have spaces to kind of, to corral things which might fight back against that thing you know?

KB: Well one place you're seeing that quite clearly is in the Western Isles where the Gaelic is dying out in places and it's really the last stronghold of Gaelic and they are wanting to introduce some kind of positive discrimination which would allow them to perhaps establish a UNESCO world heritage site for intangible heritage but it means disadvantaging incomers, people who can only speak English and it's actually a really difficult challenge.

RM: Well sometimes these sort of artificial ways of interfering don't work out, sometimes.

KB: So that's kind of an extreme case of that I suppose where maybe this is a, but I think probably for me it's different because I did not grow up here, so I am looking at it differently, although I did also come from a fairly small community.

[1:01:24.7]

TB: Sorry, where are you from, tell me?

KB: Well I'm from Northern Ireland.

TB: Oh really?

KB: Yes but I grew up in a town rather than a village and it certainly wasn't as remote as this but I think, you know Sylvia talks in her interview she says about when they first got a curator they didn't want to pay somebody because they thought they'd just get somebody who'd just treat it as a career and to step on to something else rather than actually caring about the place or the collection and I seem to have got sucked into it I think. I've been here now for six years and I've married here, I've settled in the community and I love the community and I think it is a special community and I think it's a community that still has some of the aspects that other communities have lost over time and I think that's one of the reasons why it's so important to, you know it's not just about the objects, it's about the stories, the individual stories but the community stories around those objects and how they tell about the sense of place and the way that people lived and the way that they still live here and trying to communicate that to other people.

[1:02:51.9]

TB: Just to pick up on that, because you mentioned that oral history was going to feature more, and you're talking about stories that people tell about things, so has there been quite a lot collected already then on that aspect?

KB: On oral histories? Yes there has, yes and that's been going on since the late 1980's both in Gaelic and in English, it's something that we've continued and actually as part of this lottery funding project we had a strand called securing the memories, where we actively went out and did about another 20, 25 more interviews with people of Roy's generation so that we could secure those stories but that's an ongoing programme.

[1:03:31.7]

TB: That's fantastic, that's just great that it's been going on for so long as well you know, that's really sustained, sure.

KB: Yes.

RM: See in the 1950's there was a BBC documentary done at Gairloch Parish and you know there was a BBC, a fellow called Peter Thompson who was a BBC interviewer and he came here, and interviewed people and we've got a transcript in the museum of that. We've got certainly some of the talks and I mean one of the people he talked to was an old fellow and his question was, what is it like to live in such a remote location so far from the centre of activities, and the reply was an indignant, but this is the centre of the universe you know, so what makes you think it's not, you know? That was the sort of view of our indigenous resident of the area, now that's maybe changed but you can see that in the old days you know residents had no reason to believe that they weren't in the centre of the universe where they were living.

[1:04:53.5]

TB: Absolutely, yes sure. Well especially I think on seaside communities where they were connected with lots of other places and they were.

KB: Much more so than now.

RM: Yes, so somebody coming from London and saying you're in a terribly remote place they were quite indignant about that.

[1:05:07.4]

TB: Yes, absolutely, sure, that's great. So, for you then, the museum is a space where these stories can be collected and told essentially?

KB: Yes and you know, one of the frustrations especially when you're putting together a new museum is there's only so much you can tell in the displays, so always thinking about how do we get those other stories out and that sort of richness of depth and the connections as well.

RM: There's a sort of dig deeper concept that if you're interested and love to read, you know it sparks that interest in looking further so that you dig deeper to find more information if you're interested.

TB: Yes, I see.

KB: And encouraging people to use our library and our archive as well, yes.

[1:05:57.8]

TB: Yes, I mean I can see you've got quite a substantial collection of reference books here haven't you that you've collected over the years?

KB: Yes.

RM: Yes.

TB: That will be great. Ok, I've covered that, visitor profiles, have you noticed them changing kind of over the years? I mean obviously you know you clearly get a lot of tourism coming through but?

KB: Well I can only really say about the last six years, but we have a lot of overseas visitors, a lot of English visitors, the rest of Scotland, mostly first-time visitors.

RM: I think in your time what you've been trying to evolve is getting more local interest isn't it?

KB: Yes, I have, and we have had more members visit certainly and I think that's tied up with the kind of excitement about - and the raised profile - of the museum as well.

TB: Yes, sorry did you say members?

KB: We have a membership system, yes.

[1:06:54.0]

TB: Oh, right ok. How many members do you have?

KB: We have about 150 all included, so there's some individual and some families but about 150 people I think altogether.

RM: So that's a minor source of income the membership charge.

[1:07:08.9]

TB: Yes, I see, lovely. And so, you've been trying to get them in what, to events or?

KB: Yes, just getting them to come back again and bring other people and spend more time in the museum.

[1:07:20.0]

TB: How's work at the museum organised at the moment? You have a committee I guess, and you have a professional curator, are there other paid staff at the moment or?

KB: Yes, there's one project member of staff and on secondment now we have a museum manager to help us open the new building and we also have a huge band of other volunteers as well, so I mean you've seen all the people who have come in here today.

[1:07:45.2]

TB: How many volunteers have you got active?

KB: Well there's about eight people just in the museum at the minute but overall about 50.

TB: Wow that's brilliant.

KB: Active volunteers.

TB: Gosh, yes.

[INTERRUPTION]

KB: We do need to wind up though because Alan's here for a meeting.

[1:08:02.3]

TB: Right ok, last question then. Give me the highest and lowest point of being involved in the museum, has there been a moment when you've thought god, I wish I could walk away from all this and has there been a moment where you've thought this is just brilliant?

RM: Well I guess one of the lowest points was our first refusal by the Heritage Lottery when we thought where on earth do we go from here, we regrouped and thought, well we either chuck it in or else we have another go. I don't think I've ever seriously thought of chucking it in, we thought well it seemed so distant to climb the mountain again, it's a bit like snakes and ladders you know, running a museum.

TB: Yes sure but well done for getting back on the board and rolling the dice again you know, that's full on yes. And a low point for you?

KB: On a personal level? A low point, I think occasionally I feel undervalued because it's such a huge task and it's actually quite, it can be quite challenging working with volunteers because nobody's getting paid and when you feel that you're doing more than you're, for example getting paid for, there's nobody to complain to because nobody else is getting paid. So, I feel like I'm doing an enormous job and I sometimes feel I'm undervalued. However, you know you go out into the community here and everybody - sometimes it drives me crazy - but everybody I speak to says how's the museum going, how you getting on, are you nearly finished, when are you going to be opening, and everybody's got so many questions and it's almost a lifestyle rather than a job which has its pros and cons. Sometimes it's a bit overwhelming but other times when you see how excited and enthusiastic the community is then it's a very, very positive thing and I think when we open our doors in six weeks' time or whenever it is, I think you know we have made so many major achievements along the last six years since I've been here and we've never actually sat down with a glass of something fizzy and said you know, we should be patting ourselves on the back, we still haven't done that and I think when we open the doors we need to do that. Northern Irish people are the same, they're not very good at congratulating themselves but we have, the board has, and the community has achieved something remarkable and I think that will be a high point for all of us.

TB: Yes of course it will be huge.

RM: The challenge will be to make it sustainable.

KB: Yes.

TB: For sure.

KB: But I think you know, there's always additional challenges ahead but at some point, you have to sit back and say you know, we should be celebrating what we've achieved here, just right now at this point.

[1:11:17.2]

TB: Yes have a fantastic launch party, yes absolutely. Right and what about a high point for you, I mean clearly that's coming so?

RM: Well I think, well I feel that I should really have retired long ago, I don't know why I'm still doing this I should be crazy. So, I hope that it will carry on because obviously I can't carry on for that much longer.

TB: But what have you got out of it? I mean clearly, you know you've had decades of involvement.

RM: I think you wouldn't be doing it unless you were enthusiastic and I get great satisfaction out of it, yes, I think it's a superb building and I think it's a legacy worth having strived to get, yes.

TB: Yes, lovely. Ok that's great guys, thank you so much I'm going to stop.

Audio ends: [1:12:08.8]