

Mapping Museums project interview transcript

Name: Elizabeth Cameron

Role: Secretary, Laidhay Preservation Trust; also role as museum manager/curator

Museum: Laidhay Croft Museum

Location of interview: Living room in Elizabeth Cameron's home (adjacent to the Croft Museum)

Date: 17/5/19

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)..

TB: So first of all, if you could just give me your name, and if you don't mind, your date of birth.

EC: Oh! I'm Elizabeth Cameron and I was born in 1938.

TB: That's lovely, okay.

EC: XX-XXX 1938

TB: Okay. Fantastic. Capricorn?

EC: No, Sagittarius!

[0:00:27]

TB: Oh okay! All right that's great, thank you. That's perfect. Okay, so well first of all, Elizabeth, perhaps you could just tell me about the setting up of the museum and I appreciate that you didn't personally set it up, but you were involved from the very early days, and I'm sure you'll know the story of it well, so, if you could just tell us how and why this amazing thing came about.

[0:00:45]

EC: Well, it was a local hotel keeper who was in the Portland Arms Hotel in Lybster, he owned that, and he just was so keen on preserving the heritage and history of the area, and that house was lying empty, Laidhay was empty, and he thought, we'll get them all interested and we'll see what we can do. And that was it.

TB: So, did he own the croft or the land?

EC: No, no. No, no.

TB: It was just an idea.

EC: No, he purchased, my husband and I had bought the croft which included the house and they came and approached us and asked if we'd be willing to sell the house.

[0:01:27]

TB: Oh, that's fascinating. Okay, great. So, do you think his motivation was to do with tourism, or was it a personal interest in history?

EC: A personal interest, I would have said. He was involved having a hotel, in tourism, but it was his interest.

TB: I see. Yes.

EC: And every old man that came into the pub, he would bulldoze them to see what they had in their sheds and would give.

TB: Oh really? Oh, I see, that's really smart.

EC: Yes.

[0:01:53]

TB: That's really smart, okay. That's great. And so, this person's name was...

EC: Mowat.

TB: What was the name sorry?

EC: Robert Mowat, Bert Mowat.

TB: Okay, Bert Moat, M-o-a-t.

EC: M-o-w-a-t.

TB: M-o-w-a-t, okay, great thank you. So, tell me about that first meeting. Had you ever met him before when he approached you?

EC: Oh yes, I always knew him, local people, I belonged to the Lybster area where the Portland is, and yes, I knew the man.

[0:02:24]

TB: Just tell me a little bit about your background, because, have you lived in this area all of your life?

EC: Uh huh, Lybster, and that's, yes, my father was a farmer, so we were in the outlying district of Lybster and husband was from Dunbeath area, so that's why I landed up here.

TB: Okay, yes. And how did you and your husband meet? Was that at a dance or something like that?

EC: Because he was very cheeky! He came forward and said "I'm going to have you out to a dance." And that was just about it. Because he knew the company that I knew, you know, and got involved. He had been a soldier and he was home on leave, and fancied me, if you like *[laughs]* so that was that, yes.

[0:03:10]

TB: And you are from a farming family?

EC: Farming family, yes, farming background.

TB: And have you farmed yourself, as well?

EC: Well, we have the croft.

TB: You have a croft now?

EC: Yes, yes.

[0:03:21]

TB: And just for those that don't know, croft farming is basically sheep farming, is that right?

EC: No, cattle, we don't have cattle now, but yes, we did have cattle at one stage, yes cattle and sheep, you carried on the same as a farmer but on a smaller scale and had to put the husband out to work, so the wife did homework.

[0:03:42]

TB: Right, I see. So, how long have you been crofting for?

EC: Well, when did we come here? '70, aye, in 1970, likely we purchased this.

TB: But you hadn't done crofting before that? You bought the croft and then...

EC: No, I was involved with my father being a farmer, and my husband's people were, he was a shepherd, his father, he knew about sheep and things.

TB: So, you both knew what you were doing.

EC: Well, we thought we did.

[0:04:17]

TB: And, I know over on, say the Isle of Skye, for example, where you've still got big estates and crofts are owned, well they're not quite owned, are they? They're kind of...

EC: Rented.

TB: Rented, really.

EC: From the estates, yes. But this one, was the previous people had bought it, so therefore, it's not on the estate, it's ours.

TB: I see, fantastic. And how big is your croft?

EC: It's a 30-acre croft.

[0:04:46]

TB: 30?

EC: 30 acres, it's a fairly reasonable size.

TB: I was going to say, that sounds quite generous, yes. And so, when you bought this place, it had the house and it also had this, I would imagine, a fairly dilapidated house, right?

EC: Yes, that's right.

TB: The old croft, shall we call it? Okay. And just tell me, so this was 1970, you said, when you moved in. So, what state was it in when you moved in in 1970, can you describe it to me?

EC: This house?

TB: No, the croft.

EC: Oh yes, it was just rubbish, it was just falling to pieces, yes, the roof was beginning to go, and we lived in a caravan in front of the house to start with.

TB: Did you?

EC: Yes, yes, till he got started here and he built this one.

[0:05:34]

TB: Oh, I see so he built this house since 1970, oh I've got you, so this wasn't quite here?

EC: No, no.

TB: Right, it's fairly modern, isn't it? Okay. So, you stayed in the caravan, built your own house, and you told me earlier that you recycled some of the timber out of the old croft.

EC: To make the cattle pens.

TB: To make cattle pens.

EC: Sheep pens, yes.

TB: And that was the timber that you found on the side, was it lining?

EC: Lining, the old beds, the boxed beds.

TB: Oh right, so you took them apart and used the wood?

EC: Well, we didn't know anybody was interested in them.

[0:06:06]

TB: Well, sure, absolutely, yes. So, are these still around the fields, could I find an old cattle pen?

EC: Oh no, that's all gone.

TB: Made of box beds.

EC: No, no, I don't think there's anything, no, nothing at all.

TB: Right, that's lovely. But you had a phone call or a knock on the door from this hotel owner, and what did he say to you?

EC: Many is the time we'd speak about, if you were in the pub and you spoke, it was always that old things that he was interested in, that was "how about your place?" and so on and so forth and then it was, the deal was made and that was it.

[0:06:51]

TB: And so, for you, was it an easy gift to give? In as much as ...

EC: Well the old house, yes, that was, I think, yes it was, we wouldn't have lived in it in any case, it was too far gone.

TB: Yes, sure. So, for you, it was a way to preserve the building, I guess?

EC: Well, yes, it was money for me to build the house!

TB: Oh, I see, right, yes of course. Right, because, so this was at a commercial rate that he bought the land off you?

EC: He just bought the house.

[0:07:25]

TB: Oh, right, okay.

EC: And just the surround, just where you walked today, just that was, that's what he bought.

[0:07:31]

TB: And do you know if, was this with his own personal money?

EC: No, no. He got grants from different, I think it's all in that booklet, I think so, but, yes, we got grants from various different organisations.

TB: This booklet says it's the Royal Commission of Ancient Monuments helped pay for the booklet, I don't know if it, I'll have a look.

EC: Yes.

TB: So, they might have helped out. And, also, it says here that they set up a trust, the Laidhay Preservation Trust. Now...

EC: We're still known as a Trust.

[0:08:06]

TB: So, when did that Trust start, do you know?

EC: Just more or less immediately.

TB: Right, so would that have been before the purchase or after, you might not know?

EC: Hmm, no, I think, well, no it would be after the purchase.

[0:08:24]

TB: So, essentially to set the building up as a charitable sort of project as opposed to a commercial thing, okay. And, so we've got this tumbled down building with holes in the roof, you've got some money now to help build your house, which is great, and it's 1970, do you know when it opened to the public? Would that have been 1976 when this...?

EC: No. We were '73 it was opened with the Tourist Information lady, set up in there, and I helped her, her day off I would do it, and from there, the next year, we were underway, so '74.

TB: Right, okay.

EC: That was the end of the Tourist Information, they were stopped in any case, you know, they used to have little tourist places in all the villages, but that was the end of that.

[0:09:20]

TB: So, that was a network of tourist information, that was like a kind of, a Council run kind of project really?

EC: Yes.

TB: And they decided that would be a good place for it, because it's on the main road.

EC: Well, I think, yes, they were in a caravan before that and I think they thought it was too busy, it was right on a corner and they put it here.

[0:09:39]

TB: I see, yes. So, that was useful first tenant, in as much as that would make people stop, right? And so, one end of the house was, I imagine, a desk with some leaflets, was that kind of?

EC: Yes, and booklets and things like that.

TB: And the rest of it was, well...

EC: Just gradually, things were coming in.

[0:09:56]

TB: Okay, so, but it took three years for it from purchase for it to open to the public, from 1970 to 1973.

EC: Yes, yes.

TB: So, just tell me about that restoration, because you must have seen that happen.

EC: Two old men, one was a thatcher, the other was a mason, and they worked with each other, and he, Mr Mowat came to pay them on a Thursday afternoon, give them their money and they walked down to the pub *[laughs]* so that was it.

[0:10:24]

TB: So, it was sort of cash in hand.

EC: Yes, yes, and they loved what they were doing, they used to have a fire going and they would make their cup of tea out there, and so on.

TB: Really, oh that's lovely. Okay. But, just two people?

EC: Two men that did the work, yes, loved it, they enjoyed what they were doing.

[0:10:40]

TB: And how long did that take, was it like over a summer or was it a couple of years?

EC: No, just one year, yes.

[0:10:48]

TB: And what they were doing was making good the walls and obviously thatching the roof.

EC: Uh huh, thatchery, thatched the roof, yes.

TB: And inside, there was...

EC: And they got the two beds out of another old house in the Lybster area and brought them here.

TB: So, these are the box beds, and they came from, was it another croft?

EC: Uh huh, in the Lybster area, yes.

[0:11:07]

TB: Right, I see. So, inside, once the building work had been done, there's a kitchen range.

EC: Uh huh, and that was there.

TB: And there's another fireplace that was there, but otherwise, was it pretty much empty?

EC: Oh, that was it, uh huh.

[0:11:24]

TB: And was there a car parking area then? Or?

EC: No, no, no. That's all been done.

TB: That was just grass, okay, sure. So, did they, so just tell me, so we've now got a building, but then it moves to a museum with things in it and car parking and all that kind of thing, so just sort of tell me about the progress of it and how it developed from being an empty building.

EC: Well, just people started giving stuff and then it was laid out as it would have been long ago, I mean as near as we could gather information from older people. And then they decided they needed a car park because of the little barn at the back, it had to be, people had to go up and see it as well, and eventually we got that car park tarred, as you could have seen, and yes, it just all took time, gradually as the money accumulated we could do something with it.

[0:12:24]

TB: Well, just to set up any museum, you need a building, we talked about that.

EC: You need people interested.

TB: Yes, you need labour, so let's talk about the labour then. So, clearly you had this Trust and you have the hotelier who's obviously was coming up, I presume, with things that his chatter to people at the bar.

EC: He loved it, he came up, I would say, practically every week, it was "how's things' going?" and he would sit and have a wee chat and just be delighted with himself and off he would toddle.

[0:12:55]

TB: And did he, kind of, lay the thing out, was he in charge of that, or was it you?

EC: I think maybe it was just me, I think, it was just left to me. I mean we knew which was the kitchen and which was the good room, you know, so the parlour as we call it.

TB: So, you took charge of that?

EC: Well, maybe, I don't, self-praise is not in it, but yes, I probably did.

TB: That was your work, then. Yes.

EC: I loved it, I loved it. Yes.

[0:13:20]

TB: And so, you were using your personal contacts, I'm sure, and friends

EC: Oh, yes, yes.

TB: And saying, "look, have you got anything that might be good for this?"

EC: And poor hubby gets, well you heard me saying, there's a bulb needed out there.

TB: Okay, yes. So, he was taking care of the practical stuff, but really you were, it sounds like you were really the curator and the manager, really.

EC: Yes, I was, I mean if I asked Mr Mowat for anything, he would see it was produced, or got it somewhere, or whatever, you know.

[0:13:51]

TB: And did you have any help, at all, I'm talking about the day to day kind of, showing people round?

EC: No, initially it was a case of, I just kept my, I could come home, I had little children too, and I would come home and see someone and go out, tend to them and then my husband got a big old mirror, which he's put on the wall of our house, so from my kitchen sink I could see, ah, there's somebody and run, so I didn't have to, sort of pay attention from the door so much. And that worked perfectly. And right up until, I think, I thought, well, I'm getting past it now, maybe I was complaining a bit, and I was only charging them as I worked, so if I

wasn't out there, but it got to the stage where I was practically the whole day, and hubby said "enough is enough, and you've kids, still." So, then we had to pay somebody and worked, and I would do a spell or whatever but the, when you started paying full time wages, that fairly drained the funds.

[0:15:01]

TB: Right, I see. So, that didn't last long, by the sounds of it, that full-time wage situation?

EC: No, there would be maybe four years that they were paying full wages.

TB: Oh right, okay, some time. And was it open seasonally or all year round?

EC: No, no, seasonally. You could, we opened from March to October.

[0:15:21]

TB: Right, I'm with you. And were you being paid for your time all the way through this? You said that you keep track of the hours that you did?

EC: I kept, they had to trust my honesty and I got paid for my hours that I worked, yes.

TB: Right, okay. So, for the whole museum's history, though, there has been paid management, as it were?

EC: Yes, yes. To a certain extent.

TB: But having an employee meant that you had to promise regular hours.

EC: That's right.

TB: And so that was more expensive, because you couldn't just react to who was there.

EC: It was usually 10-5 or something like that, and I've seen many being out there much later. In fact, one son, he used to say, "you can go home, now, Mum. I'll do it." And he could tell them, he was a 10-year-old, maybe or something.

TB: Oh nice. So, the kids were involved too.

EC: Yes, they got involved yes, not the big fellow who's out there, no, he wasn't interested, but the younger guy did, yes.

[0:16:16]

TB: That's nice.

EC: And it's funny how, as they got older, they changed, because the fellow, was the little chatter when he was little, is now the quiet man, and he's the big *[laughs]* yes.

[0:16:27]

TB: Yes, it's funny isn't it. Well I think for children it's lovely, because it's a bit like they're running a shop, isn't it? Or they're hosts.

EC: Yes, that's right, they got involved.

[0:16:36]

TB: So, we're talking about 1974, that sort of time, was that really when you had objects in there and you set it up as a museum.

EC: People started coming, yes. And it's just been building, we still get stuff handed in, you know, not much now, but still you get the odd thing.

[0:16:57]

TB: Yes sure.

EC: Like milk bottles from the school, I mean that's not so very old.

TB: Yes.

EC: But that size of small milk bottle, that was donated a short while ago.

TB: Really? Okay, yes. You were telling me earlier, we'll perhaps, just for the recording, just say, who has been donating the stuff and also, I asked a question, did you ever say no to anything? Can you just...

EC: I'll never say no, never say no, take it all, yes, hide it if you're not really interested, you know. Don't have a problem, if it was something, but people just come and say they've got such and such "are you interested?" Yes please.

[0:17:39]

TB: Why do you think it's important not to say no?

EC: Because it will be lost, completely, if we don't try and preserve things, it's going to go.

TB: Why is it important to keep these things, though?

EC: Well, it's your history. Surely your generations to come, how did they ever live? How did they manage? Well, you can see it there.

[0:18:04]

TB: And there's quite a few sort of stories in that display, and so perhaps, what are the important ones for you? You were saying how important it is to know about what life was like in the past, but what kind of elements of that life do you think is important to tell people about when they come round?

EC: The hardship. The hardship, and think about poor ladies, I mean they molly coddled their men and they did outside work with them, and they had big families. They were just slaves. Drudges, just shocking, really. Now we women can shout *[laughs]* yes.

[0:18:50]

TB: That's interesting, so when you take people round, let's just say that I was a 13-year-old girl, that you were taking around.

EC: Oh yes, we'd go into more detail.

TB: So just tell me, what kind of things would you pick up for someone of that age, just to give them a sense of that, because you've got an amazing array of objects, haven't you? But just give us a sense of kind of what...

EC: Well we used to get the school kids, we used to get a lot of school children and you just, you know, you didn't quite give them the full details, but you sort of slowed it down a bit and the kids were quite fascinated, I mean holding up the ladies knickers which were split both front and back, you know, it was, they just couldn't understand, that they could, big long frills round their ankles, more or less, it was just.

[0:19:40]

TB: So, they were split so they could go to the toilet without taking all of their clothes off, was that right?

EC: Yes. *[laughs]* that's right.

TB: And what other kind of things

EC: And even the pot under the bed, you know, kids knew nothing about that, the stone hot water bottle to keep you warm. Yes, lots of little things.

[0:20:04]

TB: You were showing me a lot of implements which were to do with labour, really, the scrubbing brush, the thing that would go round to move the washing, what's that called?

EC: The dolly peg.

TB: And...

EC: That was all hard labour for, hard labour.

TB: Yes, that's right, so cumulatively, you did give the impression, that actually this was quite tough, a tough existence. Yes. And also, just in terms of, just talking about local history, because the croft is not just about crofting, there's a lot of machinery there, it's also about agriculture, but then, in the kind of, when we go into the kind of parlour sort of room, it's also about all kinds of local history, too, so there's three big stories going on there, which is rather lovely. So, just tell me about what this kind of place.

EC: Even the musical instruments, because quite often, even if a man could only play the mouth organ, or sometimes his wife, there was always music, they were always, although there was a lot of drudgery, they were very happy in the evenings, you know, when they would sit down on the dark nights, yes.

[0:21:16]

TB: Yes, you showed me a picture of the illegal still.

EC: Oh, yes, they always had their wee dram, yes, the whisky still.

TB: Yes, we we're getting a flavour, aren't we, yes, of the kind of social life as well as the work?

EC: Yes, yes.

[0:21:37]

TB: But, do you think it's important, is the story of agricultural work in this area, is that also an important thing to *[phone rings]* do get it if you want to, I don't know, for you, is that an important thing to be communicated, or is it not such a big deal? Is it well covered?

EC: Well, I'd better answer it.

TB: Please, I'll pause this.

[0:22:04]

TB: So, I was just saying, about the wider story of agriculture and crofting, whether that's important to you, to portray too, or is it more domestic?

EC: It was at the time, maybe not so much now. I'm getting old. My family are not interested, the big fellow is in Canada and the younger fellow is down at Hinkley Point, he's working there, so they're not going to be involved, so I think that would take my interest out of it, because at one time you're fighting for your family and, well obviously they're not that interested, and they'll not return and come back here, no.

[0:22:47]

TB: Well, that's interesting, so in the early days, you were thinking, well, it will be nice to have the stuff because I can, because your kids might take over the croft and this is part of the history of it.

EC: Yes, yes, that's right. And I think that could be the case, pretty much, especially in Caithness because we don't have a lot, I mean there's the wind turbines at Dounreay but there's nothing really to keep with, an up and you know, a youngster wants to do things, and there's nothing much for them here, they've got to go. I mean most of the lads that was in my bigger boy's class, they're all gone, they're not in the area.

[0:23:31]

TB: Yes, I see. I can see that that's, in some ways it's very exciting, because obviously they're going to pastures new and learning new things.

EC: Well, yes, yes, yes.

TB: But on the other hand.

EC: It's a shame.

TB: It's a shame for the community, isn't it? And for families, I think yes, so it's quite hard. And could that also be why, I'm just thinking about, because there's a lot of stuff that people have brought and so that means that they're not, it doesn't have a use for them in their homes, right, because they're bringing it to you.

EC: No, no.

TB: So, could that be connected with the fact that people are moving away, or I don't know?

EC: Well it's just the younger generation, they're not interested in all the knick knacks that we have. I tried to get rid of stuff, nobody wants it. "Don't palm it off on me Mum!" I think that's the same with a lot of, because you go into a house that young folk have, they don't have ornaments and stuff around, you know, they don't seem as keen on maybe keeping things as maybe we did and I think that's gone.

[0:24:32]

TB: Yes, I see what you mean. That's right. Yes. So, the museum is a good place for it them to end up, isn't it?

EC: Yes, yes.

[0:24:42]

TB: And when people bring it, they must tell you stories, I'm sure.

EC: Oh yes, that's right, you get the history, "this was my granny's" or "this was my mother's" or "I used this" such and such.

TB: So, you must get quite an intimate idea, actually.

EC: Oh, I love it, yes, I really loved it, very much so, but I've sort of come down a bit, not so fit.

TB: Right, do you mean physically fit?

EC: Yes, I think I have been. Once I retired, I think that was kind of, you're out there the whole time, sort of thing, so I thought, well I'd better take a back seat.

TB: Taking so much time, okay, yes. But you were involved for, wow, you know.

EC: A long time, yes.

[0:25:24]

TB: That's 50 years isn't it? Nearly.

EC: Nearly.

TB: So, that's quite a thing.

EC: 40 something years, yes.

TB: That's quite a thing to walk away from, but that being said, it's still there and you do keep an eye on it don't you?

EC: Yes *[laughs]* cobwebs on the windows, pinch or squint, somebody has handled that, that annoys me.

TB: But that's nice that you're still keeping an eye on it.

EC: Oh, I still have a key. I have a key, yes, I can get in any time and check it out.

[0:25:55]

TB: So, who runs it now, because, clearly?

EC: It's still a Trust. Half a dozen of us.

TB: But, do they, does the person in the tea room, do they pay them a bit of money?

EC: The tea room pay a rent to us.

TB: Oh, I see.

EC: That's how it works, yes.

[0:26:14]

TB: So, who looks after the actual museum? Is there anyone who's in charge of that? Or is it just voluntary? Is it you?

EC: *[laughing]*

TB: It's you, isn't it? *[laughs]*

EC: I suppose it is, I don't know. Just now it's worked but the fact if somebody comes, the tea room let them in, so they open the door, say 10 o'clock in the morning, and they'll open the door, turn on the lights, and they go back to the tea room.

[0:26:38]

TB: Okay, and there's a donation box which, a sign to say voluntary, for people to give.

EC: Yes, there's not much goes in it, because, once the door is open, people go in, who says they're paying? But, if you're in the tea room and you think you'd like to go and you speak to, you can get your booklet and, you know, pay there. But you're actually depending on the honesty of the public for the door lies open all day.

[0:27:09]

TB: Yes, so the income has gone down because you haven't got someone actually there monitoring it.

EC: There the whole time, but if you have somebody, you know, how do you balance that off? Because somebody being paid the monies that is coming in, is going out as quick.

TB: Yes, sure.

EC: It's difficult.

[0:27:27]

TB: But it is ticking along and it seems to be...

EC: It is yes, we're managing.

TB: Because lots of museums close, you know, to survive for 50 years.

EC: I know, there's the, uh huh.

TB: So, you've done well to keep it going.

EC: We're doing not too bad, we struggle on.

[0:27:41]

TB: Just tell me about the Trust. You said that there are six of you, so are you a Trustee?

EC: Well, yes, we're sort of, we're all classed as Trustees, aye, yes.

TB: And so, who is on that?

EC: I've a neighbour from here that's very good, I have another, there's three of us go from here, are on the committee, and there's another three from Lybster.

[0:28:06]

TB: Okay. Why in Lybster? You said things came over there in the early days.

EC: I think it's just because that's, probably Mr Mowat's influence, you know, it was always somebody from the Lybster area.

TB: Right okay.

EC: Same parish, probably.

[0:28:22]

TB: So, is it...

EC: It's difficult to get people to come on committees now, they don't want to be involved, they'll come to a meeting, but they don't want to be involved. So, we're not too bad, we're working quite well with the half dozen.

TB: Okay. And these are active, kind of members, that do different bits and pieces, in theory. [laughs] Okay.

EC: The treasurer is very good, she's very good, and I could call on any of them, if you asked, they would help. The treasurer is really [unclear 0:28:56] yes, so she's good.

TB: But really, as you live here, of course, you are the kind of one that is basically looking after it, okay. And, just tell me about, financially, you've had some grants, for example the one...

EC: To start with, yes.

TB: Do you know where that came from, you said you weren't sure?

EC: It's not in there? I thought it was in there.

TB: It might, I don't know, I'll have a look.

EC: I don't know, I thought it was, maybe it's not, I have it written somewhere.

TB: Don't worry, if not. But, later on, you got some quite, you got some other grants to do up the new shed?

EC: Yes, that's right, that was a local grant, that's the local people.

[0:29:35]

TB: Was that for the local Council?

EC: Not the Council, no, it was the Dounreay, I think there was ...

TB: There's Heritage Lottery fund.

EC: The Council helped to do this booklet, I think.

[0:29:47]

TB: So, what, have you had any kind of big grants?

EC: No.

TB: These are kind of a few thousand, kind of.

EC: No, we've tried and we've tried the wind turbines too, we're not employing, we're not, nobody is learning from it, sort of thing, so you know, you've got to, to get those grants you've got to be employing somebody or doing something special or doing a new project, so we were unfortunate, we're sort of in the middle. We're also unfortunate for where the turbines are, because we're out of the area.

TB: Oh, I see, so you can't apply for that.

EC: The man that does have turbines in the area, doesn't give us a penny, because it wasn't sort of, when he got the turbines initially, it wasn't acknowledged that they had to give to us. Nowadays they sort of stipulate that you must give so much to the....

TB: I'm with you.

EC: You know for grants and things.

[0:30:43]

TB: But, did you get some major money for the shed with the...?

EC: Yes, where the implements are. Yes, that was good money, yes that would pay most of it, yes.

TB: Some European funding and Heritage Lottery funding. And what was the budget for that, roughly, do you know at all?

EC: How much the shed cost?

TB: Yes, would it have been sort of tens of thousands?

EC: Have I got to go and look for my...?

TB: Don't worry, it's okay, I'm just.

EC: If I get my...

[0:31:09]

TB: It's just the scale of it, really, just kind of whether it was a few thousand or a lot.

EC: Just hold on while I go and get my book.

TB: Yes, sure, that's great thank you.

EC: That's a copy of the booklet that has been issued, and here.... right

[0:31:28]

TB: Oh, this is great, lovely.

EC: What have I got to find here? There's Mr Mowat, that started it all.

TB: Oh great! Yes. Let me have a look.

EC: That's him.

TB: Great, thank you. If I could take a picture of this, is that all right? Thanks very much.

EC: Uh huh.

TB: So, I mean, he presumably well he died, right, and he sounds to me like he was pretty involved.

EC: Oh, he was, it was just his pet, he had no family, I'll tell you this was his family.

TB: Really, yes gosh, so it had a pretty important role in this life but it also sounds like a partnership, really between the two of you, to kind of get it going and keep it running.

EC: He was a quiet man, really.

[0:32:15]

TB: What role does this place have in the community because it sounds to me like it's probably got quite a big...?

EC: No.

TB: No?

EC: Not really. It did initially. I'm looking for this grant...

TB: Oh please, yes, that would be great. So, initially then, what role did it have? As a place to put things, for a start.

EC: A place to put things, yes and I suppose, we used to run sales.

TB: Oh, right.

EC: Auction sales, that people could put, and that involved everybody, you know? So, there would be auction sales and that would, again, a little money, but even that died, it wasn't worth our while by the time you took commission off people and so on, it wasn't worth.

[0:33:02]

TB: That's funny, because I saw a sign, an auction sale sign in the museum, so that's, in fact you're running auctions, was that a way of getting money in?

EC: Uh huh. Now we do just a boot sale, so it's rubbish and it's pennies, but it does bring in a little.

[0:33:18]

TB: So, how did the auction work? So, people would bring things to sell?

EC: Just an auction sale, yes.

TB: And who was the auctioneer, was it you?

EC: No, no, Mr Mowat did it, to start with and then we got the proper auctioneer, I think he did have a ticket for doing this, but.

[0:33:35]

TB: And was this agricultural kind of stuff, or household, or anything?

EC: Anything.

TB: Right. So, it's a little bit like a boot fair.

EC: That's exactly but on a bigger scale.

TB: But in the old days, without the boots.

EC: Yes, we'd have it in the local hall, it would be packed with stuff, yes. I can't find where the grants are.

[0:33:54]

TB: And did you have any other way of getting income, apart from donations?

EC: No, no.

TB: And did you always charge to the people to go in?

EC: Well, initially it was donations, just we leave you this, to you know, and then we charged, it's now £2.50, some people say that's too little, but...

TB: It's hard to get right.

EC: It's hard to get it right and we can see where other places have been charging £4 are out, finished.

TB: Yes. Sure.

EC: Oh, there's another photo. That's the old man that was, that did the thatching.

TB: Oh lovely, oh that's great.

EC: He was, that was the main thatcher.

TB: That's wonderful. These are lovely things. This is your kind of records book.

EC: My [*unclear 0:34:53*] book. Everything is in it. And there's...

[0:35:03]

TB: Were you always a part of the Trust?

EC: I suppose, yes.

TB: So, you've always been on the management committee?

EC: I've been here from the start, yes, Trustees, no [*looking through book 0:35:13*]

TB: So, was your role initially, as a, were you a secretary or the president or?

EC: No, Mr Mowat did the secretary work to start with, there's his writing.

TB: I see, but you ended up having that role.

EC: And I ended up, yes, no I'm not going to find this...

TB: Don't worry. But it's lovely that you've got all of this actually in, written down.

EC: Oh yes, we'll keep all that, it always happens every year, all the time. I write it down as it comes.

[0:35:48]

TB: And what sort of visitor numbers do you get? Do you keep count of it?

EC: Aye, we were way up, initially, before I was finished, we were up to 27,000 a year.

TB: Really?!

EC: And now we're down to, it maybe 2.

TB: Those are big figures.

EC: It was big figures, oh, I was chuffed that year.

TB: It's amazing.

EC: So, we were getting a good wage that way, I would be most of the time out there. But it fell off.

[0:36:19]

TB: Okay, so what was that peak year then? How come you've had so many, that's really amazing.

EC: It just happens, yes.

TB: I mean, I'm wondering whether, did the Highlands, they put up as a tourist area, in some way?

EC: No, I don't think so, I think it was a gradual build up, and then it's just started coming down again. I suppose more and more museums came on the scene.

TB: Ah, right, okay.

EC: You know, there was that too, and if you've seen one, you know, you're not going to go to them all, are you?

[0:36:49]

TB: Yes, because there's one in the town here, isn't there, a local history museum?

EC: Yes, well, it's on its...

TB: Oh, really, it's vulnerable is it?

EC: It's very vulnerable, very, very. And there was a big fall out with the committee, someone had walked out and, yes...

[0:37:09]

TB: So, was this an organisational thing, or was it about the direction of the museum itself?

EC: The Dunbeath one?

TB: Yes.

EC: Too many bosses.

TB: Oh, really, okay.

EC: I would think more than anything else, and one being jealous of the other and I hope that's not being recorded!

TB: Perhaps we'll talk about that afterwards. All right. Yes, we haven't named any names, okay. But your point is interesting, that the fact that there are a number of local history museums on this road, aren't there? And it's, I imagine, for tourists.

EC: Well, you've Helmsdale and then you're into Dunbeath, well you've two here, and then you're into, well Lybster doesn't have one as such, but.

[0:37:52]

TB: And then Caithness did have one, but then you've got Lachabre [phonetic 0:37:54] Castle and distilleries and there's all these things competing, aren't they, I guess, for people's time.

EC: Yes, you can't goggle everything. Now, I'll find this when you're gone.

TB: Don't worry, it's fine.

EC: But it does, because I should have had that.

[0:38:10]

TB: But you've got such a great location here because it's by the road.

EC: Oh, it's a good site, very good site.

TB: Tell me about the tea rooms, was that always a separate thing that was kind of rented out, or did you run that too?

EC: No. The tea room was actually a friend of mine and she would have loved just a wee hut to sell out the window, bacon rolls, things like that, but her hubby was more pushy and he appeared, or he made arrangements to get this, it was a demountable school room, you know. So, this little hut that Mr Mowat we had all agreed, all of a sudden, became this, but nobody said a word. And, well, I think they should pay much more for the rental.

TB: It's difficult isn't it?

EC: But they turned around last AGM, I brought it up last AGM and they turned around and said that "in that case, we could look after the museum ourselves." And I said "well you do open the doors, put on the lights, put off the lights, close the doors. You don't do anything else." Anyhow, it was left that they're getting it quite cheap.

[0:39:27]

TB: Right, okay.

EC: I would say.

[0:39:28]

TB: Yes. But people are stopping to have the tea, and I suppose that does at least bring custom to the museum.

EC: Oh yes. Now, there was a few years that we got a donation, £500 donation, from the Jennie Gordon Memorial Foundation.

TB: Oh, right, okay, I don't know it.

EC: No, no, and that went on, I think she died, and that because it came to an end, yes.

[0:39:55]

TB: But it sounds like you haven't had any major, major grants, so the money to keep this thing going is coming from entrance fees, from auctions, in the early days, and the tea rooms.

EC: That's the three. In fact, the next, the 25th, we have a sale in Lybster, so if you're still in the area, you can come to the boot sale.

TB: Oh right, so the boot sale, that's great, okay.

EC: We have one every May, the end of May.

TB: And how much money do you need to bring in to keep it ticking over a year? Is it a few thousand?

EC: I'm just the secretary, I'm not the treasurer.

TB: Don't worry, it's okay, it was just a...

EC: The last treasurer's report, 2018, if you want to look at it, here it is.

[0:40:41]

TB: Thank you, that would be excellent. Okay, right, so [reading] yes. Gosh, thatching £8,500.

EC: Yes, see, it's a big one. And we were getting a grant from the Council for that, and that's stopped.

TB: Yes, I can see you're getting a grant from Historic Scotland for £6,000 and CMSF. What would that be? CMSF.

EC: Scottish National.... anyhow.

TB: Right, so there are some grant income, and, yes, okay.

EC: Yes, the Council were quite good, you know, we usually got something every year, but that's the local Council, you know.

TB: Maybe that's the Council, because it looks like they might have paid for the car park tarring.

EC: That's right. We got a grant for that.

TB: Ah, okay, because that's a big cost, isn't it? That's £20,000. But not including that and the thatching, so basically there's nearly £30,000 has gone on thatching and car park tarring, but the rest of it.

EC: But that's not every year, you see.

TB: No. I mean the rest of it probably adds up to, I don't know, £3,000 or something, which isn't insurmountable.

EC: Oh no, you've got your electricity bill too, that will come out of it as well.

TB: Thank you, that's great.

EC: Anyhow.

[0:42:16]

TB: That's a lovely document.

EC: That didn't really help you very much.

TB: No, no, that's been great. So, we talked about the money.

EC: I'll find it for you, when you've got out, next time I'm doing something this way, I'll say, Oh! There's the grants.

[0:42:30]

TB: Yes, yes, don't worry. In terms of sort of tourism, more generally, do you have much dealings with the Council or tourist authorities?

EC: No, nobody bothers. Left to get on with it.

TB: Really?

EC: I would say, no. And you're out on a limb, so you're not, where we live, so they're not, nobody's bothered.

TB: It surprises me, given that, what about, there's this kind of, what's it called, the Highland 400 or the 500?

EC: 500.

[0:43:00]

TB: Has that brought in numbers?

EC: Not a lot, you sometimes, maybe not so much for the museum, but the tea room will get, which will maybe help us. They, no, you see you're getting maybe eight or nine cars of the same type, zoom, the club, you know, all the fancy cars go up, yes. We get quite a few camper vans come in.

[0:43:23]

TB: Now that's big, isn't it? I noticed that, yes.

EC: Yes, they'll be doing their route, slowly, different speed, and yes, you get them in. But I had a, was it yesterday, Dutch lady, and she said "can I go in?" and I said "yes it's £2.50" because she had no book in her hand and I knew she hadn't and "oh" and then she started asking me questions, and I couldn't have been nasty, I had to answer her questions, I thought you got your £2.50 worth by the time she'd left, she'd sort of sussed it all without seeing it, she'd got the information.

TB: Yes, that can be hard work. You mentioned that coaches were popular for a while, and it tailed off a bit.

EC: They were very good for a while, but that's gone down too.

[0:44:15]

TB: So, what's happened there? Do you know why?

EC: No. Older generation, maybe, no. Don't know. And there are so many museums now, if you've been to one, that's it, you've had enough.

TB: I think that's maybe it.

EC: I think more than anything else, that would be it.

[0:44:35]

TB: Over these 50 years, have you noticed how tourism has changed, in terms of the people coming in?

EC: Yes, yes.

TB: In what way?

EC: Well, they're not so interested, they don't take so long to go around. I mean, initially they would take a while and you'd think, oh, are they ever going to get out of here? You know? But now, they're in and out within, I mean if that girl hadn't met me, if one of them hadn't known me, I don't know how long they'd been in. Do you know? Because I was there and yak yak, you see. But, no, it's just a change of, I had people or not, the young ones are not interested. You know, you're not getting 30-year olds coming in, you know, that early,

young married woman, they're not bringing their kids in, you know. School holiday time, and you think oh, bumper, but no, doesn't happen anymore.

[0:45:32]

TB: Right, I see.

EC: It was at one time, you used to think, oh gosh, here's a bunch of kids coming, but not anymore, no.

[0:45:40]

TB: Okay, so they're doing other things.

EC: Yes, yes. They're sitting playing on their phones.

TB: Playing on their tablets. But, so, the main bulk of your audience is then retired sort of people, would you say?

EC: Yes, aye, yes.

[0:45:53]

TB: Also, I think, presumably all this is meaningful, still, in as much as that they'll recognise, just as I did.

EC: It's memories, yes, "mother had her, or we had that ourselves," some of them say, yes. You see old people, and they just love it, because they're now more modern, or they're maybe living with their families and it brings so many memories back to them, they do love it.

[0:46:21]

TB: And do you think the story of crofting and the story of agriculture here, it's very distinctive, it's not, there's agriculture museums in Kent that don't look like that, you know?

EC: No, no, I know what you mean, yes.

TB: It's quite different.

EC: Yes, yes.

[0:46:34]

TB: So...

EC: Yes, even the museums here, now, they've all got their big placards on everything, it takes away, well I would have said, it takes away from the homeliness of our one.

[0:46:47]

TB: **Now that's interesting that you say that, because the first thing I saw when I walked in the door, was kind of a home sweet home, kind of, so just tell me about that. So, you wanted to create an atmosphere there?**

EC: Yes. This is how we lived. There was one girl that worked there for a wee bit and she would put little tickets on everything, I never touched them, but I'm glad they fell off *[laughs]*. How's that? I didn't remove them, but they, yes, well blue tac doesn't last forever.

[0:47:21]

TB: **Yes, I see. Why didn't you like that? Did you feel that it took it away?**

EC: Yes, it was too museumy, rather than being a home. Which is maybe the wrong way to look at it, as well, I might be wrong.

TB: **Part of the joy of that sort of museum is that you can touch things and you're discovering, aren't you?**

EC: And the fact that, maybe, when I was there, I was always there, or somebody was always there to tell them what it was, you know.

[0:47:49]

TB: **Now, that's important, because without that information, if you're not there, then it is mysterious, genuinely, yes.**

EC: But I can't go on forever.

TB: **No, no, sure. So, just tell me a high point and a low point. So, 50 years of involvement with this extraordinary building, and place.**

EC: Just meeting people, love meeting people from all different countries, and yes. Love that and so many people had relations in this area, and they would be wondering who and how and "can you tell us anything?"

[0:48:24]

TB: Oh, that's interesting, so these were people with family connections, that perhaps...

EC: Yes, and they'd moved on, moved south or even, yes, even gone off to Australia and New Zealand. I mean the old croft up the field from our museum, there's a lot of that family in New Zealand and they've been coming back and forth and they come in to me and they toddled up the field and looked round the old house, and yes.

TB: Oh, that's lovely, so you can guide them to this.

EC: Yes, yes, they know where they're...yes.

[0:48:55]

TB: That's very powerful, actually, isn't it?

EC: Yes and you know, even older people, they'll say "you know my grandfather came from here" and they're a grandfather themselves, you know, that sort of, but it's and if we can help, they'll give you a surname and sometimes you can say, well go up to so and so and she'll tell you. I love that side of it.

[0:49:22]

TB: Yes, that's very deep, isn't it? So, the world is coming to you, isn't it? Strangely, you're literally all over the world.

EC: Yes, in a way yes.

TB: But, it's not just kind of random people just passing through, some of them actually have quite deep connections.

EC: Connections, that's right, yes. I even met some of my own relations, how's that?

[0:49:41]

TB: Really?

EC: They were Australian, aye.

TB: Oh, wow!

EC: In fact, related to both sides of the family, funnily enough, you know. And that would have never happened if they hadn't have come into the museum and we spoke.

[0:49:56]

TB: Well, it sort of strikes me, that clearly, this area has had massive depopulation, hasn't it?

EC: Oh, yes.

TB: Because agriculture has changed. We talked about that earlier, with your sons, but that's kind of coming round again, at least with tourism, somehow, it's a way of coming back, isn't it?

EC: Aye, yes.

[0:50:14]

TB: So, that's kind of dealing with the fallout, almost of that. Because the people that leave don't have the connection to place, do they?

EC: No, no, the feelings not there, aye.

TB: That you might have, yes.

EC: Aye, the feelings not there.

TB: They can find it again, perhaps, that's fascinating. And has there been a low point? Or, the toughest moment for you, of it all?

EC: Of the museum?

TB: Yes, yes. When you thought, man, I want to throw all this in?

EC: No, no. Maybe more lately because the interest is not the same, you know. When people are coming, when there's a lot of, it keeps you interested, it keeps, you, and if your committee is not, we've got a committee and they're quite good, but there's not enough oomph in them.

[0:51:03]

TB: Mmm, I see what you mean.

EC: You know, they're there and they come to the meetings, but they're not, I don't know what it is.

[0:51:13]

TB: Yes, so it sounds to me like, as you say, if there's big crowds, then clearly, it's exciting, isn't it? You've got stuff to do.

EC: That's right.

[0:51:21]

TB: Yes, so it's almost like you need...

EC: But, I've a neighbour up here and he's very good, don't get me wrong, I suppose he sees whether there's cars in the car park or not, but you know it would be nice if he said "how's the house business going? Is it good, is it not?" But they're not saying that, you know, and you think, why do I bother?

TB: Yes.

EC: But I would hate to see it go.

[0:51:45]

TB: Well, that's the other thing, I mean, you know, that would be quite something, quite a loss wouldn't it? And I'm not just talking about the building.

EC: But the stuff that's in it.

TB: It's holding so many people's things, isn't it? That would be a hole.

EC: And we've been, probably be wrong of us, but because of the bills and things, and the electricity is quite hard, and we've been keeping that down low, and I noticed that it should be up, it shouldn't be down so low. You can see it on the bits and pieces that are around, you know.

TB: They're starting to decompose.

EC: The dampness, or something, it's not quite right, and then of course I go and switch them up again, so yes.

[0:52:27]

TB: No, you're right, these things don't last forever, do they if they're not kept at the right?

EC: No, no. Definitely got to look after.

TB: And that's one of the problems of having a museum in a, not just a historic building, but also a fairly drafty historic building.

EC: Absolutely, yes, yes. You're never sat out there without your coat! There you are.

[0:52:51]

TB: Just a note, an outsider's question here, but do you think crofting is tied up in any way with ideas of Scottish identity?

EC: Well, I don't think you find crofting anywhere else, as such. I mean, it's farming on a small scale, but you're not getting that, on the islands maybe, but not throughout, even the farmers nowadays, it's more and more and more acres, they just can't work with. I mean we had, what 100 and something acres, we were a fairly well-off family, you know, when we were young. I've a nephew doing it now, and he's still got to go out and work.

TB: Right, so the money's not in it as it was.

EC: No, no. You need more acreage to get subsidies and what have you. Sssh, I never said that.

TB: It's changed a lot, yes. I was quite surprised to find that crofting was still going, actually, just because....

EC: I would have said that most of the crofters, now, well, 50 acres and under, they're all out working, they've got to.

TB: Right, okay.

EC: And we don't have the climate to do any extensive, you know...

TB: Crops, or...

EC: That's right. Because you're depending on the weather, and so on.

TB: Right, okay, yes, it's not like there's lots of agricultural alternatives here.

EC: That's right.

TB: Unless it's wind power or solar, I don't know.

EC: Yes, yes.

TB: Yes, interesting. Well, I suppose the croft, the size of the croft, did make it quite accessible in as much as, you don't have to be a millionaire to buy a farm, like you do...

EC: No, no, I mean some crofters will only be, what two or three acres.

TB: Yes.

EC: This is a big croft, really, in comparison.

TB: Yes, so it makes it successful in that respect, you can have a go.

EC: Yes, yes.

TB: Yes, nice. Thank you so much, Elizabeth, that's brilliant, I'm going to stop it there, if that's all right?

Audio ends: [0:54:46]