

The Landmark Trust

THE SHORE COTTAGES, BERRIEDALE – Summary of History

The sweep of 200 years of Scottish history lies behind the group of buildings on The Shore at Berriedale on the Langwell Estate. Together, the terrace that was originally four small fishermen's cottages, the bothy with storeroom beside it, and the icehouse behind represent an unusually complete survival of a mid-19th-century coastal salmon fishing station. Yet the story of The Shore, and of Berriedale's sister settlement of Badbea two miles to the south, goes back further, to the late 18th century when both were settled as part of the process of economic reorganisation across the Highlands known as The Clearances.

The Clearances were the forcible removal of crofters from the uplands by improving landlords, to make way for sheep and better agricultural practice on their land. They remain a deeply emotive subject, debated by those who emphasise the brutality and bleakness of life for the evicted crofters and those who stress rather the improving and even benevolent motives of the landlords. The Berriedale straths (or inland valleys) were cleared of crofters in the 1790s by Sir John Sinclair of Ulbster, who introduced Cheviot sheep in their stead. Sir John had bought the Langwell Estate in 1788 and was a significant figure of his day: improving agriculturalist, roadbuilder, town planner, politician and founder of the (Old) Statistical Account of Scotland. When crofters were displaced from their smallholdings, many found a new livelihood on the coast in the herring fishery, which was booming during the Napoleonic Wars.

Sir John settled his Langwell crofters at nearby Badbea (deserted by 1911) and on The Shore at Berriedale, where William Daniell captured a picturesque scene in 1819 of fishing boats pulled up on the shingle, nets spread to dry and herring lassies up to their elbows in troughs, gutting the fish before they were 'kitted' in barrels (packed in salt).

Daniell did not include the site of The Shore Cottages in his picture, and it seems most likely that they were built c1840. Sir John Sinclair sold the Langwell Estate in 1811 to an Edinburgh lawyer, James Horne, who leased the fishing at Berriedale to Aberdeen brokers. Berriedale was already renowned as much for its salmon as its herring, the salmon being netted at the mouth of the river as they returned from the sea to their spawning grounds in rivers inland. Horne's nephew Donald inherited the Langwell Estate in 1831 and by 1840, salmon fishing had been given precedence on The Shore. Larger herring stations were by then well established at Helmsdale, Dunbeath and Wick. Donald Horne decided instead to focus on the higher value salmon, and built the cottages and (probably) the icehouse and storeroom/bothy. The annual salmon season ran for a couple of months only, the fish being despatched to lucrative markets in the big cities, packed in ice harvested from winter lochs and stored in the icehouse.

The cottages are first mentioned in the estate records in 1846, and the 1841 census records four households on The Shore, supporting a construction date of around 1840. These would have been model cottages compared to the traditional turf-roofed byre dwellings of Caithness, and necessary to attract and keep reliable fishermen for the short salmon season.

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In 1856, the 5th Duke of Portland, of Welbeck Abbey in Nottinghamshire, bought the Langwell Estate. During our own restoration, we discovered that under the 6th Duke in 1884 (we know the date from a scribbled record left by joiner Magnus Ganson on the reverse of some panelling) the cottages were given a comprehensive refurbishment. The floor levels and roofs were raised some 300-400mm, probably because of inundations from exceptionally high tides. The principal rooms were finished with matchboard panelling, no doubt from the newly opened sawmill on the estate, and were given suspended timber floors. Under one, we found a battered woman's shoe, perhaps hidden to ward off evil spirits. No. 3 was extended to the rear at the same time, two sheds added as shared privies and a footbridge installed. No. 4 was similarly extended in the 1930s, and given a lean-to at the end of the range, since lost but whose floor remains, beautifully made of pebbles from the beach, aligned for drainage.

The cottages were inhabited until the 1950s, when, lacking electricity or mains water, they fell out of use. Their isolated position and foot-only access meant it was not economic for the estate to refurbish them. They stood empty and at the mercy of the elements until 2006, when someone who used to play on The Shore in his youth brought them to Landmark's attention. The cottages' plight and beautiful setting made us keen to help, and a lease was agreed with the estate. It was decided to keep No. 1 to its original floorplan to recreate as closely as possible the experience of living in one of these tiny cottages, and to combine the remaining three for a larger group of up to six people (the two can also combine).

The restoration was carried out by Stuart Leavy and Carl Dowding of Landmark's direct labour team, who worked with numerous local subcontractors and consultants through the course of the project. Materials were brought to site using a specially constructed barge on a fixed cable across the river. A first phase of work was carried out in summer 2010 to re-roof the cottages and make them weathertight. The original lime mortar was carefully matched, to repoint the walls and fill voids filled where the earth mortar used for their core had leached away. Lichen was removed from the exterior using a high pressure hose and the traditional limewash finish reinstated. With full funding in place, work began in earnest the following spring. Surviving timber floors were lifted and most of the original flagstones found still in situ at the primary floor level. Enough were salvageable to use as the floor for No.1; those in No. 2 are modern replacements. Underfloor heating was installed throughout that uses mostly renewable energy harvested by Air Source Heat Pumps. Windows and doors were reproduced using the remains of the originals as references. Partitions were re-created on the line of original, central subdivisions once for sleeping areas, today for bathrooms.

The Shore has always been a marginal settlement, its eventual desertion reinforcing this essential character. Today, this very isolation is part of its magic, and all who stay here will help perpetuate its story, and the wider history of Caithness.

The Landmark Trust is a building preservation charity that rescues historic buildings at risk and lets them for holidays to pay for their future maintenance. No. 1 Shore Cottages sleeps up to 2 people, and No. 2 sleeps up to 6. To book the building or any other Landmark property for a holiday, please visit www.landmarktrust.org.uk