

Inverness Castle – An opportunity to create a venue of International importance

First it is important to make a few assumptions.

- Inverness Castle presently is the home of the Sheriffs Court and employs a number of highly paid staff. They will not be lost to Inverness but displaced to a new Court.
- The Scottish Court Service pays for the operation of the Castle.
- The Castle is a Grade A listed structure.
- The cost of heating and maintaining a Castle is horrendous and a heavy drain on any operator. Ask any Clan Chief!
- The Castle was built in the early 19th Century as a court and prison and therefore is not internally suitable for restoration to an original Castle model.
- The Castle must be complimentary to the City Centre, not a competitor.

An opportunity like this only comes once in a lifetime and there have been many calls over the years that the Castle should be a Tourist resource. Thousands of Tourists gravitate to the Castle to find it closed to all but the legal profession, prison vans, police and nae'r do wells of society. The Court service has expressed a willingness to re-locate to a purpose built facility, possibly on the Longman, as the present Court is no longer fit for purpose.

What has been suggested and is supported by the Highland Clans Partnership Group is that this is the golden opportunity to establish an **International Clans and Heritage Centre for the Highlands**. There are however three obstacles. The cost of refurbishment, the operating costs and the thorny subject of Grade A listing. One could suggest that whilst the exterior has architectural heritage, internally it is a 'modern' working environment and would benefit from serious upgrading to a useful state.

So what do we envisage? We see a modern interactive visitor attraction telling not only the story of the Clan system, but of the Picts and Celts, the Clearances, the Drovers, the kelpers and herring industry, even the Hydro and what made our landscape. A **Portal** to the museums and history of the West and East Coasts, to Fort George and Culloden as much as attractions in their own rights. It is often considered erroneously that the Clans only interest the diaspora; the Macdonalds of Connecticut or the Mackenzies of Nova Scotia. The history of the Clans, the tartan and the musical culture attracts peoples from all over the World from Finland to China to Brazil. Just work at a Highland gathering and the interest of all visitors in the origins and wearing of the kilt, the origins of the Tartans, the feudal system and the Jacobites come thick and fast from all nationalities. It is this wider tourist base that needs to be drawn in and educated in those areas that are unique to our culture. Scenery is Scotland's greatest draw followed closely by Heritage and Ancestry which alone draws in £400 million pa to the Scottish Tourism industry. The Highlands is the centre of both.

We also need to look to viability of such a resource.

- Unlike a museum, a tourist attraction can charge entrance fees. You pay to visit Urquhart Castle! Any Clan Centre also generates considerable income from its shop.

- Inverness is lacking in a large scale restaurant/café to cater for the large numbers of coaches. Therefore a large scale restaurant (300 plus covers) would not compete with local business and could still showcase local produce. Cafeteria style would be preferential.
- On Saturdays, which is turnover days for many tourists, it could well double for weddings and in the evenings as a large function venue. This could create a healthy revenue.
- Suggestions have been tabled for a Boutique Hotel which has possibilities but I would suggest that the majority of profits would be eaten up by the operator and staff costs. It could also be construed as somewhat elitist. However serviced apartments have proved a popular attraction in many of our major cities and would attract the foreign visitors for holiday accommodation. A model worthy of consideration would be such as a 'travellers Club' (The Highland Club?) where regular visitors can pay a membership fee and get discounted accommodation. Possibly other discounts and special deals, some online, could be included in such membership. This would of course bring in a welcome guaranteed income to the Castle over and above accommodation rental costs. This would not restrict access to such serviced apartments but could guarantee a lot of repeat business. Companies may also rent such apartments for foreign clients. Breakfasts could be taken in apartment or in the restaurant saving duplication of catering facilities.
- We would suggest that it would be appropriate for Visit Scotland's Tourist Information Office to relocate to the Castle. This would also produce a positive cash flow(rent) as well as being the obvious venue for Tourists.
- Commercially we would suggest that it would be appropriate to encourage such as kiltmakers, bagpipe/clarsach makers, tweed weaving and other local crafts to establish workshops in the Castle, firstly to showcase their skills and wares and also as a shop front to the visitors. This could be a permanent feature and/or a seasonal one. A design of a street of shops would be an appropriate model.
- Music is part of our culture and it would be great to arrange regular Poetry/music events in the Castle as well as live music in the restaurant. It is an opportunity to showcase the best of the Highland's musical culture. This could be a good source of revenue if managed well. The structure and intimacy of the Castle will be very different to an event at Eden Court.
- Archeology is of great interest and some accommodation should be made to encompass that. Whether that is by moving the Inverness Museum into the Castle or not is open to suggestion but the caveat is that museums cannot charge!
- We would also suggest that an opportunity exists of small seasonal exhibitions showcasing various areas and activities could be encouraged. This would enable smaller regional attractions/museums to showcase their facilities.

Essentially we see the Castle as a building of International importance as a gateway to the beauties and experiences of the Highlands. Not as a one stop shop but as a source of information at the start of a number of heritage trails. The task is to enthuse and direct visitors to travel the Highlands and Islands, to stop in Gairloch, Inverewe, Stornaway, Ullapool, Brora, Helmsdale, Moray and Newtonmore; to support the tourism and accommodation business in the extended regions; to visit Eileen Donan, Cawdor, Achnacarry and Dunrobin. To accomplish this we need a Visitor Centre that is a centre of excellence, not just a hollow shell. For want of a better description, this would be something on the lines of a living museum. The Clan Centre would use audio visual as well as actors telling the story in much the way of the old 'seanachaidh' of days gone by. The more bloody and gory the better the visitors will like it.

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