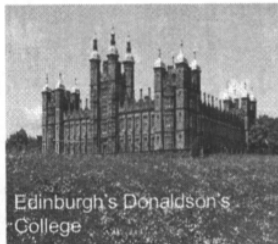


Speculators next door

The speculators have moved in a block away from HGF's new Edinburgh shop. Donaldson's College - the magnificent A-listed school for the deaf - is being sold to developers. Cala has revealed plans to turn the city landmark into luxury flats.



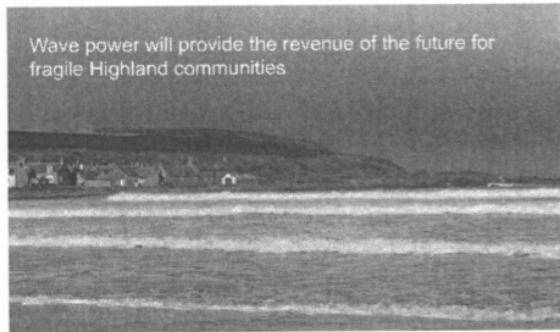
Edinburgh's Donaldson's College

But the 1851 building designed by William Playfair is singularly unsuitable for conversion. "It would have been much better kept as some form of institution" said Oliver Barratt of the Architectural Heritage Society of Edinburgh. However, according to a local property expert "a housing deal would have been the most lucrative". So the architectural integrity of the masterpiece is going to be sacrificed. The land is worth too much to do anything else.

Renewable energy rents for Hebridean communities

Following the recent community buyout of the North Harris estate, plans are now underway for Scotland's biggest ever land buyout. The 90,000-acre sale would see the transfer of 850 crofts into community ownership. The current owners of South Uist Estates - a syndicate of nine families chaired by London stockbroker David Ruck Keene - are reported to be in "harmonious and positive" discussions with representatives of the local community.

The planned new community trust will take possession of rents from fish farms, quarries, sporting and fishing. But the big new source of community revenue in the coming years will be the development of renewable energy schemes. Substantial rents for sites for wind turbines and wave and tidal schemes will flow from locational values, especially after the recent announcement that the government is to spend £6bn on wind farms. As Scotland has the greatest wind resource potential in Europe, the Western Isles' Atlantic seaboard is likely to host many of the new turbines.



Wave power will provide the revenue of the future for fragile Highland communities

The Herald newspaper has pointed out that the North Harris sale "would mean that much of the Western Isles would be under community ownership." The Scottish community land movement seems to be securing from private hands the only substantial economic rents to arise in the highlands since the nineteenth century heydays of kelp and herring.

Highland house prices head for half a million

Some properties in Inverness have seen a 50% rise in value in the last two years, as the area becomes increasingly sought-after. Local families may be overjoyed at the prices their houses are now making, but others are worried. "The Inverness market has now risen to a level that is not sustainable too far into the future" says Richard Smith of Allied Souter and Jaffrey, the north's largest firm of valuation surveyors.

Smith is concerned for the next generation of home owners. High prices mean "the bottom end of the market is stagnant. More people are staying with their parents. This is a backward step. Highland Council is seeking a higher volume of affordable housing, but that's difficult for a developer when the farmer or landowner wants the full land value." The Council is not unaware of the problem.



North Sea oil has greased the palms of Aberdeen land owners for years. Atlantic discoveries will do the same in Inverness

In its response to the government's land reform consultation paper the council noted "the whole issue of a land tax should be thoroughly investigated. Such a tax, if carefully designed, could help to ensure appropriate use and management of land."

Cuillin calculating landlord to pocket £10m

Clan chief and landowner John MacLeod of MacLeod has agreed to transfer the Cuillin - the world-famous mountains on the Isle of Skye - into public ownership. In exchange he wants money to fix the leaking roof of his ancestral home. But as the BBC's highland correspondent pointed out - "£10m for the roof of a castle" seems an awful lot "in exchange for something which the public thought it owned anyway".

Three years ago MacLeod caused outrage when he announced he was putting the mountain range on the open market. An anonymous American buyer was reported to be in line to buy the heritage land. The sale never materialised. As an islander speaking on BBC Radio Scotland said after hearing of

MacLeod's change of heart - "if nothing else, talk of land reform has stopped some international land speculator coming in and trying to turn a fast buck."

When the land was originally put on the market, experts cast into doubt the veracity of MacLeod's title. Leading counsel's opinion was that MacLeod's title was only "capable" of including the mountains.

Land Reform Scotland drew attention to the fact that the original royal charter made reference to conditional periodic payments in money and services in return for the grant of land. The campaign group pointed out to the Crown Commissioners, who'd been charged with investigating the issue, that no such payments had been recorded in living memory.

But the Commissioners brushed aside popular concern and declared MacLeod's title valid.

Today's £10m price reflects the 'collector's' value of the land. The economic assets included in the sale comprise only a couple of run-down houses, two holiday cottages, a small camping site and a modest farm - all worth only a fraction of the asking price. The rest of the property is wild mountainside.

The price is the outcome of the failure of the authorities to hold the landowner to the terms of the title. Those "conditional, periodic payments" have been capitalised. So in buying back what many believe is public property anyway, it looks like the community at large will lose out a second time.