

Merkinch Briefing Note

Reserve Time Line

1995	Scottish Wildlife Trust survey says, "Numerous areas of high wildlife value... the Muirtown Pools are ideal for visitors and with easy access."
2005	Inverness Greenspace Audit, which says, "The site could be viewed as a semi-natural reserve".
January 2007	Highland Biodiversity Officer approached by Merkinch Greenspace to provide advice on designating the proposed Merkinch LNR.
November 2007	Merkinch LNR designated. The 50 th in Scotland.
November 2007	Launch of the LNR national press coverage.
Winter 2007/8	Reserve boundary monoliths erected.
March 2008	BTCV Scotland Green Gym starts at Merkinch.
April 2008	Reserve Management Plan completed.
June 2008	Highland Council announces £50,000 contribution to the reserve over the next 3 years.
January 2009	Official opening ceremony of the reserve, large attendance.
March 2009	Habitat and Species Management Plan completed.
May 2009	Interpretive plan for the reserve completed.
July 2009	3 people counter installed. In June/ July over 100 people per day visited the reserve.
September 2009	Logo for the reserve agreed.
	Staffing required developing the LNR further being considered and potential funding streams identified.

1. Recent History.

Merkinch Local Nature Reserve was designated on the 28th November 2007 after the signing of a formal agreement between the Highland Council and British Waterways on 14th November 2007. It is the only Local Nature Reserve in the Highland Council area and the 50th in Scotland

Merkinch Local Nature Reserve consists of 54.7 hectares of land and foreshore to the west of where the River Ness enters the sea. To the south it is bounded by the Caledonian Canal, where it enters the Beauly Firth; the north western boundary of the Carse Industrial Estate and to the east by the main housing area of Merkinch. The northern boundary is down to the low water (spring) mark.

The impetus for designating this area came from Merkinch Greenspace (formerly known as South Kessock Environment Company), a voluntary organisation with charitable status. It consists primarily of local volunteers. This group approached the Highland Council's Biodiversity Officer for advice in getting the area designated as an LNR in January 2007. The partners supporting Merkinch Greenspace in this venture are Highland Council, Merkinch Enterprise, greeninverness, British Waterways and SNH.

2. Main issues raised relating to the LNR by the local community:

- People like the area and would like to spend more time there. Words used to describe the area – invigorating, unsafe, pleasure, freedom, open space.
- Lack of knowledge of what the Reserve area has to offer is limiting people's use of it
- Suggested improvements to the Reserve area include: establishing dry, level surfaces to the exiting paths, seating throughout the Reserve, cutting back of vegetation where this impedes access along paths, provision of low-key signing and information of the opportunities the Reserve provides.
- The main concerns are: the noise and disturbance by the trail bikers, dog fouling and stray dogs, with litter being considered a problem to a lesser degree.

Other important issues relating to the management of the Reserve are as follows:

- The level of knowledge of the biological assets of the Reserve is limited. This does not allow for detailed management prescriptions to be determined
- The Reserve is subject to various anti-social behaviours
- The Reserve is little known outside the Merkinch community and its status locally is not adequately recognised
- The provision of the old ticket office as a focus for environmental and heritage education is under threat

3. Site Description.

The Reserve is within walking distance of the main housing areas of Merkinch, South Kessock and the village of Clachnaharry. This comprises a total population of 12,331 (2001 census), and is within 5kms of the majority of the population of the City of Inverness (67,700 in 2004).

The Reserve has no conservation designations directly applicable to the site, but is recognised as being of local value for biodiversity. The Low Water Mark is the southern boundary of the Moray Firth European Special Area of Conservation (SAC) – for protecting the famous population of the northern bottle-nosed dolphins. To the west of Clachnaharry is the Inner Moray Firth Special Protection Area (SPA) for birds, another European Union designation.

The site is almost wholly owned by Highland Council, with a small area (just under a hectare) owned by British Waterways. The proposal of this area as a Local Nature Reserve is consistent with Policy G5 of the Highland Structure Plan, Integration of environmental and community interests. It states, "The Council will support measures that link the protection, enhancement, understanding and enjoyment of the natural and cultural heritage with the sustainability and vitality of local communities".

The Reserve is managed by the steering group of Merkinch Greenspace. There are no members of staff currently dedicated to the management of the Reserve.

4. Management Plans.

As part of the Local Nature Reserve Agreement a site management plan had to be produced. This was done in March 2008 using local consultants. The Reserve aims and key outputs are detailed in section 5.

The Management Plan identified the need for a species and habitats management plan and an interpretive management plan. These were completed early in 2009.

If one were to try and deliver all the actions in these management plans this would exceed the capacity of the LNR committee and its partners. Therefore the next step is to look at the actions and see what resource implications they pose and develop a plan of action to endeavour to deliver these actions.

5. Reserve Aims.

These are overarching aims which the Reserve must deliver on if it is to achieve its vision of being the best Local Nature Reserve in Scotland: a place where people and biodiversity co-exist to each other's mutual benefit

1. To increase the benefits to individuals and communities through active involvement with the Reserve.
2. To celebrate the biodiversity value of the Reserve through the conservation and sustainable management of its habitats and species
3. To maximise the learning opportunities afforded by the Reserve, and to communicate the importance of biodiversity to the local community, Inverness residents and visitors to the area
4. To improve and upgrade access provision to and within the Reserve.
5. To establish governance for the Reserve that will sustain its management through innovative access to funding sources
6. To deliver best practice management for a Reserve that will be an exemplar for other Reserves

A total of 34 Objectives and 41 Measures have been identified in the management plan that will go towards delivering these aims.

The following are some of the key measures identified:

- Upgrade footpaths
- Habitats and species surveys
- Deliver programme of events
- Identify local voluntary reserve rangers
- Feasibility study for new visitor facility

6. Budget.

Merkinch Greenspace and its forerunners have been relatively well resourced, through grant income and volunteer time allowing it to deliver small scale projects such as the Reserve entrance markers (monoliths), seating, path improvements, management plan writing, annual celebration events and feasibility study for an eco-friendly visitor centre. Organisations such as SNH,

Highland Council and Highlands and Islands Enterprise have all contributed grant or capital monies to the reserve.

As already mentioned, delivering the actions in the various management plans will exceed the capacity and current budget of Merkinch Greenspace so further funding will need to be identified and sought.

7. Site History.

Merkinch (island / meadow of the horses in Gaidhlig) was originally an estuarine island; the east bank of the canal follows the old shoreline. The Roy map of 1747-55 see <http://www.nls.uk/maps/> shows this outflow to the Beauly Firth had been filled in. Previously the Ness had a secondary channel that flowed into an estuary down what is now Abban Street. It is difficult to say if this was a main channel or just one that ran at times of high water. At this time there were unenclosed strips of cultivation shown on the map but little in the way of buildings apart from the ferry cottage, Carnarc Point didn't exist.

The building of the canal (opened in 1822) created the seawall that runs from the canal to the old ferry slipway, enclosing the mini-estuary.

By the Ordnance Survey map of 1870 Carnarc Point, a breakwater had been built and enclosed (presumably drained) field systems had been created. No open water was mapped but the lagoon area was noted as "liable to flood". In the 1900 OS map a lagoon was noted behind the sea wall and the remaining area behind the sea wall is mapped as wetland.

Sluices in the sea wall allowed some tidal flow allowing the salt marsh and mudflat to remain, though these were no doubt made to allow water flowing from the wetlands out to sea. The building of the railway (opened in 1862) finally cut off the area to the south east of the line from the sea and creates the freshwater lagoon to the north of the railway embankment. A burn still flows parallel with the canal at the bottom of the southern embankment, where this flows from is unclear as it disappears from view under Telford Street.

Jonathan Willet. 25th August 2009.