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The Great  
Escape: Adventures on the  
Wild West Coast

Monty Halls

The  
**Great Escape**

Adventures  
on the Wild West Coast

**MONTY HALLS**



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# Contents

[Cover Page](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Introduction](#)

[1. Arrival](#)

[2. The Build](#)

[3. Stocking up](#)

[\*30 May: My First Game of Shinty\*](#)

[4. The Storm](#)

[5. RIB](#)

[\*27-29 June: The Boat Pull\*](#)

[6. Below the Surface](#)

[7. The Crofter's Way](#)

[8. Wild and Free](#)

[\*5 July: The Glamaig Hill Race\*](#)

[9. Settling in](#)

[10. Peaks and Troughs](#)

[\*26 July: The Highland Games\*](#)

[11. Last Days](#)

[\*13 September: The Goodbye Party\*](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[Picture credits](#)

[Plates](#)

*This book is dedicated to Robbie Stuart  
- a proud Scotsman who fought like a lion  
to the very end.*

# Introduction

There is a real temptation when writing about the west coast of Scotland to lapse into clichés. The entire place demands hyperbole – the landscape, the people, the wildlife, and the heritage. It all seems impossibly romantic upon arrival, and gets more dramatic the deeper one becomes immersed and absorbed. Particularly in a place like Applecross – surely one of the most beautiful locations in Britain (you see, I’m doing it now) – where every bend in the road reveals great landscapes, and where eagles shriek and stags leap with positively indecent frequency. In writing terms, I had run out of superlatives in the first week and had filled several notebooks with deranged babblings about the grandeur of the setting. The next stage could well have been wandering the hills in a baggy shirt and a kilt, periodically bursting into song about the heather and littering my conversation with the word ‘Bonny’. I wasn’t just seduced by the west coast; I positively eloped with it, showing slavish devotion in a one-sided relationship that could well have ended in tears. Happily, sanity prevailed, and I began to see the reality beyond the film-star looks, experiencing the highs and lows of any protracted stay in a single location. There are, however, things that must be said about Applecross, and I’m delighted to be given a brief opportunity to say them.

I travelled into the heart of the west coast trembling in anticipation. I knew it was going to be beautiful, but I

harboured genuine fears about how I would be received by the local population. I was, after all, chasing a dream, head full of romantic notions, none of them backed up by the practical skills that are essential to surviving and prospering as a crofter. I was heading into the heart of a small, tight-knit community where I would be wholly reliant on the people around me. Although the idea of the quaint crofting and fishing village is an enchanting one, I had experienced enough small communities in my travels around the world to know that hostility and suspicion might well be the default setting upon my arrival. As I twisted down the road over the mountain pass with the village sitting on the coast below me, I had the feeling of dropping into the unknown, a realisation that the next six months could be a very lonely time indeed.

From the moment I pushed open the door of the pub on that first night, the people of Applecross showed me nothing but consideration, understanding, friendship and hospitality. The only prejudices that existed did so within myself, a city boy awaiting the first rip off, the first sneer, the first gesture of open hostility. It never materialised, and that was the making of my experience in the village. On one level there was the acquisition of new skills on a daily basis under the tutelage of a series of patient, skilled instructors, passing on their knowledge to someone who must have appeared positively childlike in the depth of his ignorance. Next was learning what community was all about, something we seem to have lost in the headlong rush of modern life. Finally, there was the setting itself, a tiny cottage on a windswept headland where the only noise came from the wind and the sea, a suitably dramatic backdrop for a time in my life that will always be special.

There was also the ever-present spectre of Gavin Maxwell, the inspiration for the journey. I was daunted by the prospect of slipping, albeit inadequately and briefly, into

his shoes. I re-read his trilogy about his life with the otters at Camusfearna when I was up there, and commend these books. No one has captured the essence of the west coast quite like Maxwell, and I speak as a man who turned the pages in the gathering gloom of the bothy, the great sea channel to Rona before me, with stag picking through the seaweed on the beach only yards away. His writing inspired me yet again, and drove me to greater efforts to understand the land and the creatures around me.

We tend to be suspicious of eulogising, of enthusiasm, of the need to communicate a passion for a place. I can speak only from a personal perspective, with my feelings for Sand Bay - the location of the bothy - and the village itself summed up neatly on my final day there. As I drove over the mountain pass, I stopped for one final time, looking back down at the bay and the village. It was a somewhat gloomy day, with the first showers of winter sweeping up the channel, however the sun was fighting a heroic rearguard action and appeared occasionally through the gaps in the dark clouds. The bay was cupped under a large rainbow, looking like something out of a children's book, with the end of the rainbow seeming to emanate from the village itself. It made me smile as I climbed back into the car to head back to my life down south, the thought that - on so many levels - Applecross was the place where my rainbow hit the ground.

# 1

## Arrival



The drive would take fifteen hours, a slow meander up virtually the entire length of Britain. Not having the first idea of what was required for my six-month sojourn as a crofter on the west coast of Scotland, I had opted to take along pretty much everything I owned. The vehicle to transport this paraphernalia was a shiny new Land Rover, now partially concealed by ropes, tarpaulins, pots, pans and the sort of kit I had guessed would be required for my protracted visit to the wild west. I had left behind my home in Bristol, and my girlfriend Antje, for what would surely be the experience of a lifetime.

Accompanying me on this great adventure was my new and gigantic dog Reuben. Ten days previously, Reuben had been living in a small concrete pen at the local animal rescue centre, a place overwhelmed with waifs and strays, and run on a shoestring by a group of hardworking volunteers. I had chatted to them about the project in Scotland, and they had recommended Reuben as the ideal companion - an easy-going, affable, get-along-with-anyone dog. He was all of these things when I finally met him. What

they neglected to mention was that he was also the size of a Bengal tiger.

Each stop for petrol saw the accents change, the scenery subtly alter and the sun track slowly across the sky. Although this drive could be said to be the beginning of my adventure, the real seed had been sown for me many years previously in the magical pages of Gavin Maxwell's *Ring of Bright Water*. His story of raising an otter in the clear waters of the bay at Camusfearna bewitched me, much as it did an entire generation. His quest to escape the madding crowd touched something basic in me, even as a child, and for months afterwards I dreamt only of silent bays, rushing falls and dark hills. This obsession with the Highlands and islands never left me, remaining a distant aspiration through the days of my adolescence, then an indulgent pleasure as my career with the Royal Marines took me to Scotland for three years, where I explored the region on long pathless rambles through many a shadowy glen and sugar-white beach. Now the wanderings of my life, both professionally and geographically, had brought me to a point where I could follow my dream of establishing a crofting lifestyle.

My reasons for heading to the west coast were, however, very different to Gavin Maxwell's. He had a profound connection with the Highlands throughout his life, and sought the peace of the west coast after his service in the Second World War. He rejoiced in the solitude of the region, and of course in the animals around him. He had, however, a rare ability to establish wildly impractical schemes, and he was dogged by bad luck. He seemed to me to be a profoundly troubled man. Despite this darker side to his personality, he produced truly beautiful prose, writing what was a gentle poem to the region and the animals that had at last given him a measure of peace. As one of the finest wildlife authors of his generation, he left a legacy that

outlived him, with books born of personal melancholy and an intuitive empathy with the natural world.

I, on the other hand, was very much a product of the system. After attending a minor public school – toddling up the drive at the age of 7 and re-emerging blinking owlily from the front gate as a foppish 18-year-old – I had travelled for a few years before joining the Royal Marines. Showing unusually uncanny judgement, I chose for my military career the only eight years in the entire 300-year history of the Marines when they didn't go to war. My time was spent running around dressed as a bush, creeping up on people in training areas in Wales, shouting 'bang' (as we were rather short of blank training ammunition) and playing a great deal of rugby (very badly). Having decided that we were unlikely to be invaded by Welshmen who didn't like people with shrubs stuffed into their shirts who shouted at them, I eventually decided that enough was enough and left the forces to pursue a career in expeditions and marine biology. Almost immediately afterwards a global outbreak of small wars and terrorist incidents saw the Royal Marines swing into action relentlessly over the next decade, covering themselves in glory whilst I studied limpets in Plymouth Sound.

Having subsequently embarked on various expeditions to far-flung corners of the world, I was soon writing for travel magazines as well as fronting documentaries for a variety of satellite television channels, most of them watched only by my immediate relatives. Finally, however, the peculiar currents and eddies of life, through which we all bob helplessly, had driven me to this point – driving a Land Rover as far north as possible on the British mainland, surrounded by an assortment of kit and accompanied by a donkey-sized dog, towards a coastline I considered the most beautiful and mysterious on Earth.

Making your dreams come true is of course a very dangerous thing to do - some are best left as aspirations, a vision to sustain you as the rain drums on the office window. Moving to a remote cottage on the coast would throw up all manner of challenges that I may or may not be capable of dealing with - my dream could swiftly become a nightmare. A good parallel might be dating Naomi Campbell - outstanding in theory, but in reality there is the distinct chance of injury, and possibly even death.

But my stay on the west coast would at last answer the questions that had always dogged me about the crofter's lifestyle. Would it really be an idyllic life in the heart of a beautiful and peaceful coastline? Or would it be a nightmare of relentless toil, hostile locals, midges feasting on my pale English flesh, and ultimately a slow whisky-soaked descent into madness?

After an interminable drive, I finally pulled up, hollow-eyed and covered in flapjack crumbs, at an old school house in the tiny settlement of Callakille, perched at the water's edge on the mainland opposite the northern tip of the Isle of Skye. This quaint old building was to be my base for the next few days as my quest for the perfect cottage took place. I had a number of possible bothies arranged for inspection over the next week, although this was far from my mind as I stumbled around the car to release the dog, who had been staring at me, catatonic with boredom, since Carlisle. The whisper of the waves and the crisp night air were the only hints of what was to come, with the oppressive darkness of genuine wilderness meaning that I fumbled my way to the front door of the house, mummy-like with arms outstretched, emitting the occasional low moan for effect. The key was tucked away under the doormat as promised, and the dog and I staggered into the warmth of the interior. Returning to the car to retrieve a few essential items of kit, I finally made my weary way upstairs, and

pushed open the bedroom door. Dropping my bag, I crashed onto the bed like a dynamited lighthouse.

Ten blissful hours later, I was awoken by sunlight streaming through a gap in the alarmingly floral curtains. I sat up groggily, my senses hastily rebooting as I took in my new surroundings. Once I had figured out where I was, who I was, and why there appeared to be a wolf sleeping on my bedroom floor, I swung my legs out of bed and ambled onto the landing. Reuben followed me out of the room, yawning and stretching before giving a good-natured wag of the tail to indicate that all was forgiven from the day before. We descended the stairs to the kitchen, where I shuffled across to the kettle whilst Reuben slumped at my feet to begin the process of the morning nibble and scratch. Moments later, with one of us nursing a cup of tea and the other temporarily itch free, we made our way to the kitchen door. I threw it open and there we stood, stock still, frozen in sensory shock.

Reuben, whose entire universe until only days ago had consisted of a concrete pen and a small grassy exercise paddock, stared transfixed at the scene before him, ears pricked, almost vibrating with excitement. We were faced with a rolling field that led down to a rocky shore, the sea pulsing and sliding along a series of mini coves and inlets, the early morning sun sparkling on mini explosions of spray as each wave dashed itself against vertical rock walls. Across the sea channel – a rich, deep blue as opposed to the usual temperate green of British waters – stood the great mountains of the Isle of Skye, dusted with snow on their crenulated peaks. The clear morning air displayed the ridges of the mountains in serried ranks, creating an impression of a magical Tolkien-esque landscape beyond, at once forbidding and beckoning. Looming over the scene was a vast cornflower blue sky. It was excessively, ridiculously, riotously beautiful.

Reuben barged past me to race down the slope towards the sea, bounding and spinning in a display of exuberance that made me laugh out loud. Although not quite as demonstrative as the dog, my feelings were similar. Like a starving man ignoring a feast, I closed my eyes to the staggering view before me, and took a great breath of air, smelling the sea, the kelp and the damp peat – the essence of a personal Eden.

\*

The Highlands and Islands of Scotland is one of the most sparsely populated regions in Europe. Although this has great appeal for the modern traveller, the reasons for such great tracts of wilderness have a distinctly dark side. Up until the Jacobite Rebellion of 1715, the Highlands were a series of self-sustaining communities divided into clans, a term derived from the Gaelic word 'clann', meaning family. Such was the bond of the clans with the mountains and glens that there were a dozen different words in the Gaelic language to describe a piece of high ground. Loyalties within the clan were strong, and centred on a chief, whose name was frequently adopted by those within the community. Such loyalty to both the name and the chief meant a high price for many during the rebellion and at the subsequent Battle of Culloden in 1746, in which the Highlanders suffered a devastating defeat at the hands of the English (and indeed their fellow Scots). This marked the beginning of a period of what can only be described in modern terms as ethnic cleansing, with entire populations forced out, the banning of Highland dress, and the use of the Gaelic language or playing of traditional music forbidden.

These communities consisted of small settlements, with the buildings created entirely from natural materials. With

the forced dissipating of the clans, the settlements themselves were simply devoured by the landscape, returning to wood, field and stream over time, enfolded by the same materials that had given them birth. Today no traces of the old Highland communities remain.

Although this period is seen by many Scots as a time of oppression by the English, there was one other element that struck at the very heart of the honour of a famously fierce and proud people. Due partly to exorbitant rents demanded by the English, and also to fund extravagant lifestyles in England and southern Scotland, many chiefs - or landowners as they were now termed - began to turn their land over to more profitable sheep farming. The subsequent evictions of families leasing smallholdings, with many burnt out of house and home or violently relocated to the coast, were a betrayal of trust that has never been forgotten. On the coast the poor soil and harsh conditions meant great hardship, demanding the acquisition of new skills such as kelping - harvesting kelp for the alginates used to make glass and soap. Many crofters emigrated, many were forced to move to the towns and cities, and many died. The empty landscapes of the west coast of Scotland today echo with the memory of a lifestyle shattered by greed and betrayal, the wind whistling around crumbling ruins that stand like tombstones for families scattered to the four corners of the globe.

Given the less than glittering track record of the English in this region, it was with some trepidation that I traversed the coast road towards my first potential cottage. I was a middle-class Englishman, an ex-military man to boot, called Monty, wearing a waxed jacket, driving a Land Rover, with a black dog in the passenger seat. I might as well cycle slowly through central Baghdad, wearing a novelty George Bush mask playing 'The Star-Spangled Banner' repeatedly on a trombone. Of course I wasn't expecting to be dragged

wriggling into a bush to be dispatched with a claymore, but in terms of displaying my origins I couldn't have been more blatant.

The first property I was due to view was described as 'run down', which in this part of the world could mean anything from an atmospheric bothy with views to die for, right through to a random pile of rocks in a swamp. The photo on the web was somewhat vague, and what's more had been taken in the lowest resolution possible. Squinting at the image from the other side of the room, a vaguely respectable looking bothy emerged, but plainly the only thing to do was to go and see it for myself.

The drive along the coast was glorious - a single track road writhing along a craggy shore with clear water beneath. Even Reuben looked up, the remains of the pig's ear I had used to lure him into the car sprinkled on his muzzle, to peer curiously through the glass. I opened the window to create a rush of clear air, Reuben's nose twitching beside me at the jet wash of new smells being fired up each nostril. Dogs of course rely on olfactory as much as visual signals, and I could only guess at what he made of the whiff of seagulls, seals, old seaweed and damp shingle that were barrelling through the window.

After a drive of over an hour, the first bothy hove into view. As I pulled up alongside, and before the engine had even stilled, I knew this was the wrong place for me. An air of complete desolation hung over the building, with sagging walls, hanging gutters, and floorboards rotted away to reveal dirt piled up by the winds that spun and whistled through the ruins. The building also had a tarmac road right alongside, an artery for an inevitable steady passage of tourists come the summer months. After the most cursory of inspections, I climbed back into the Land Rover and began to thumb through the map to find the next location.

This place looked more promising, an old chapel in a tiny cove on the Isle of Skye. If ever there was a mystical island in Britain, it is Skye, shrouded in legend and folklore, the favoured haunt of wandering poets and tormented writers. I felt a keen sense of anticipation as I crossed the bridge from the small town of Kyle of Lochalsh, the sea channel surging beneath me, with the shadowy blue mountains of the island rising ahead. A long drive up the coast led me to a tiny turning circle at the end of a rutted road, and here Reuben and I left the vehicle to search for the cove as described on the website.

It did not take us long to find the chapel, sitting with its back to the cliff wall, surrounded on three sides by steep rocks with the sea immediately ahead. Descending into a deep gulley that led to the cove, there was immediately a sense of preternatural hush, a stilling of the wind that magnified the echo of our footsteps as they crunched on the shingle. Reuben glanced up at me and edged closer, ears flat and tail low. This was a weirdly atmospheric place, and had I possessed large floppy ears and a bushy tail they would have been doing precisely the same.

Approaching the front door of the church, I leaned gently into the weathered wood, causing a theatrical creak on the hinges as it swung open. Reuben whimpered beside me, and seemed to be toying with the idea of jumping into my arms, Scooby Doo-style, with chattering teeth and trembling paws. It was as though the last congregation - obviously many decades ago - had simply closed their hymn books, stood from the pews and filed silently out of the church, closing the door behind them to let the church slowly turn to dust and fall gently in on itself. The pews remained in neat rows, the pulpit stood empty and silent at the front of the aisle, and light filtered eerily through the boards on the windows, specks of dust turning and glinting in the rays of a watery sun.

I walked slowly into the building, my feet crunching on old glass and the wind rocking the door on its hinges behind me. The thought of spending six months here was not appealing. Actually, the idea of spending the next ten minutes here was rapidly losing its charm. I could have leased the place of course, but only if I fancied several months of ghostly apparitions, rattling windows, long-lost relatives paying me visits in the dead of night, and the prospect of emerging at the end as a white-haired, cackling maniac in a pair of soiled pants. By this stage, Reuben had turned tail and slipped out of the door, back to the Land Rover and the world of pigs' ears and nice smells. He had the right idea: the chapel, I decided, would not do.

With the long drives and the two viewings, the day had mysteriously slipped by, something I was to grow used to over the next six months. I wearily climbed into the car alongside Reuben, and headed back up the road to a small pub I had seen en route. Having checked into a tiny room, so bijoux that every time I stepped out of bed I had to clamber over the increasingly annoyed dog, I went down to the bar and considered my options. Rather naively, I had only arranged three possible places to view, so I was in real trouble if the final bothy turned out to be as wildly unsuitable as the first two. For this last one on my short list, a place called Applecross, there hadn't even been an image on the website. My hopes were not high. I lapsed that night into a troubled sleep, and dreamed of Antje and home.

\*

To get to Applecross, I had to cross a high road pass called the Bealach na Ba - translated as the Pass of the Cattle. Even on the map, this road looked a handful, crushed between densely packed contour lines that created a dark smudge on the map, the road itself a yellow line squirming

in their midst, punctuated with black arrows showing areas of extreme steepness. This is the highest road pass in Britain, reaching an impressive 2,053 feet (615.9 metres) before plunging in a series of roller-coaster bends down into the tiny settlement of the village itself.

On arrival at the foot of the mountains, still white with the snow on their peaks, the road looked even more daunting, snaking its way into the dark shadows of the gulley that in turn led to a massive saddle that has always been a natural route over the mountains for crofters driving their cattle south. The mountain road had only been built in 1822; before that it was simply a path created by nervous cattle driven by sinewy drovers who averaged ten miles a day, a feat of considerable endurance as the winds howled and the cattle skidded and slipped over rocks shattered by the winter frosts. These drovers were legendary hard men, and were the only profession in the Highlands allowed to carry arms after the rebellion, in order to fend off predators and bandits. They were in even greater danger on the way home, returning along the same routes with their payment for the drive. They swiftly learnt to hide their wealth, with many melting down their silver coin and turning it into dull buttons on their ragged jackets. The great rebel Rob Roy was a drover, and their reputation persists to this day.

Even after the road over the pass was built, the winter snows made it impassable for half of the year, meaning that Applecross was in effect an island community, relying solely on stores and communications from the sea. Even the addition of a coast road in 1976 did not truly open access to the outside world, still requiring a singularly determined traveller to reach the village, which of course was precisely why I was so keen to visit the place myself.

The Land Rover roared and rattled up the hairpin bends of the pass, my knuckles white on the steering wheel as the land fell away beneath us. In a country where jaw-dropping

views are standard, the view from the lay-by at the top raised the bar to a new level, with Skye sprawled in a sparkling sea in the distance, all curling bays and sharp ridges. The run down the other side to Applecross was exhilarating stuff, with my feet pistoning the brake and clutch, and Reuben being bounced from one side of the cab to another.

Applecross eventually hove into view beneath us, a scattering of houses in a broad sweep of bay, fringed by green fields and golden sand cupping the Atlantic rollers that whispered up the shallow beach. Applecross was also known as a'Chomraich in the Gaelic tongue - a place of sanctuary. This was due to a singularly determined Irish monk called Maelrubha, who in AD 673 set up a monastery and declared the land around it sacred. The monastery is long gone, with a church now standing on the site. The main village consists of a row of white houses on the shoreline, clustered very sensibly around a pub. The whole community nestles beneath the hills that rise immediately behind, with pine forests coating the crags and gorges, and the River Crossan murmuring over rocks and rapids before disgorging into the bay. Standing just back from the shore is Applecross House, an imposing white building built in 1740 by the Mackenzies - the main landowners of the region. It still stands four-square facing the sea, the white walls contrasting with the emerald green of the fields surrounding it. Dotted the fields were the gigantic red figures of Highland cattle, several of whom glanced up as we passed, peering at the Land Rover through shaggy fringes of trailing hair.

Leaving the village behind me, I travelled several miles along the coast road to reach my destination, the encouragingly named Sand Bay. The road rose gently over the brow of a rolling hill, and there before me was the bothy.

Dominating the scene was the bay itself, a huge spread of golden sand criss-crossed by a venous network of tiny rivulets and streams, all running into a gentle, ankle-slapping surf that flopped onto the beach. Even as I stopped the car on the rise of the road, I could see oystercatchers bustling along the shoreline, looking neat and manicured in their black and white dinner jackets, vivid orange bills probing the sand before them. At the back of the beach was a huge sand dune, more akin to Namibia than Scotland. It was dotted with footprints speaking of lengthy climbs upward, alongside grooves that marked many a shrieking descent by exhilarated visitors.

The right-hand side of the bay was dominated by a craggy headland, with the bothy perched defiantly on its tip. I drove down to the small car park at the head of the road leading directly to the bay. The walk down to the beach crossed first field, then bog, then dune, before finally giving way to the sand itself. This array of new environments underfoot meant that Reuben covered this distance by revolving rapidly as he moved, springing and cavorting, before eventually charging to the edge of the surf, then sprinting back to – rather unexpectedly – bite me on the bottom. I took this to be a sign of approval of his potential new home.

In a dip behind the peninsula stood the ruin of the main house, for which the bothy had served as a barn. Although little more than a pile of stones, it still held the memory of former grandeur, a single wall standing proud of the bracken with a fireplace at its base, the very heart of any Highland home. Scuffing the floor with the toe of my boot revealed the traces of old partitions between rooms. I was plainly not the first person to be seduced by the beauty of Sand Bay. This house spoke of success and endeavour, of a lasting occupation over many decades. It was a slightly eerie place,

as old ruins tend to be, making me feel like a trespasser, treading on the memories and dreams of its last occupants.

The bothy itself was a two-minute walk from the main ruin. From a distance it did not look encouraging, giving the impression that it had been subjected to a fairly sustained naval bombardment, with gaping holes in the roof and a general air of neglect. It was only on arriving at the front door – or at the space where a front door should have been – that I realised how lovingly the bothy had been built. Over 150 years earlier, rough hands had gently piled stone on stone, with the gaps carefully filled by smaller rocks. It wasn't just a few weeks work that had created those walls; it was generations of training and apprenticeships, of learning a trade handed from father to son to create something that would stand on the shore for many decades. The walls were plumb straight, each several feet thick, standing proud having stared into the teeth of a century of Atlantic storms. Behind the bothy were the animal pens, known as the fank – three neat squares with the walls perfectly intact, topped with gigantic flat rocks to maintain their integrity through the fury of winter gale and rain.

I went and sat on the headland itself, watching the clouds scud gently across the sky, the mountains beyond the flat calm of the sound, and the waves roll onto the beach. Some things don't require a huge amount of thought – I had four good walls, pens for stock, a setting that I could only have dreamed of, a great deal of work to do, and a very, very happy dog. I was sitting next to Beachcomber Cottage.

## 2

### The Build



**A**cquiring the bothy, even for only a six-month period, was going to be no easy matter. One crofter memorably described his property as ‘a small patch of land surrounded by regulations’, an apt term for a lifestyle cocooned in historical enmity, ancient and modern legislation, and contemporary politics. The Applecross Estate Trust website had given me details of a local contact who could advise me on the legitimacy of my project, and I walked briskly back to the car park, phone held aloft, squinting at the screen for a signal. As I walked over the top of one of the larger dunes, my phone beeped into life, and I immediately dialled the number.

‘Archie MacLellan, hello,’ said a friendly Scottish voice.

‘Archie, it’s Monty Halls. I’m looking at the bothy down in Sand Bay, and would very much like to lease it off you for six months.’

‘Aye well, it’s probably best if you pop up and have a chat with Mike Summers in the Estate office, and then we can take it from there. Mike’s really the man who can give

you an idea of what is possible in terms of the renovation, and he's very much my contact on the ground out there. Just pop in and tell him what you'd like to do, and then we'll see.'

Archie's tone was friendly and open, and I felt a powerful surge of optimism rise within me. Perhaps this wasn't going to be the delicate negotiation I had initially envisaged.

Buoyed by this minor triumph, I positively skipped back to the Land Rover and bundled the dog into the back. As the Estate foreman for the Applecross Estate Trust, Mike would be a key figure in the acquisition of the cottage in Sand Bay, and I was keen to make an impression. Drawing up outside Applecross House, I found Mike's office tucked discreetly around the back, and tapped on the door.

'Come in,' said a low voice. Perhaps it was my fevered imagination, but I seemed to detect a level of reticence even in those two short words.

Mike stood from his desk as I walked in, a fit-looking man honed by years of hard physical work, with lines on his face etched by wind and weather. He was wearing stained blue overalls tucked into battered wellies, the one-size-fits-all attire of a man of the land. He extended one hand in a firm handshake, his palm rasping against mine like a piece of driftwood. His smile of welcome certainly seemed genuine, although his opening words caught me somewhat on the hop.

'So, you want to do up the old bothy, do you? You know that many of the bothies were destroyed in the clearances - the technique was to burn the roofs so no one could get any wood to rebuild them. It was a savage thing to do, something that leaves scars that'll never heal. People round here have long memories, you know.'

Although I had expected to be questioned about my motives for taking over the bothy, I hadn't really anticipated