

Cultures of the shieling: a seasonal nomadic, or going where the grass grows

The shieling system was a pastoral form of farming – a herding rather than agrarian society which was partially nomadic, or practised what is called transhumance. This is called the shieling system, because of the shelters called shielings, or shiel bothies which were used to house people and animals during the nomadic migration. Although the early Celtic peoples did cultivate crops as an important part of their subsistence diet, they were primarily herders rather than owners and cultivators of land. Built into this historic method of subsistence farming was *transhumance* meaning that they practised seasonal migration, called in Scots flitting, during which the community temporarily moved home in family units during the summer months. This movement followed the emergence of new grass on the pastures, and the herds would be driven higher into the mountains as the summer progressed. The flit to the shielings began at *Beltane*, the Gaelic May Day festival (01 May) and the migration to the high pasture would take place in early June. The high pastures were where the distant shielings, sometimes called the summer town, were located. At the high pasture, the milking herds produced milk, rich in fat which was skimmed for cream to make butter and cheese. The summer flit usually concluded at *Lughnasa* on 01 August (or Lammas in the Christian European calendar), which marked the start of the harvest season. Sometimes cattle were kept on the hill and brought down at the start of winter, but these would have been animals that were used for meat rather than for milking.

The Celtic calendar divided the year into seasonal quadrants according to pastoral cycles. The coming of summer was marked by the ritual purifications of fire at Beltane which falls mid-way between the Spring equinox and the summer solstice in the northern hemisphere. This time of year was really important because it marked the coming of the lighter, warmer months, during which the land was more fertile and productive. Beltane means bright fire in Scots Gaelic, also named for the sun god *Belenus* it was marked by ritual purifications through fire. Cattle were droved, or driven, between two fires in advance of the seasonal migration to purify them and also as a fertility ritual. During these ritual fire ceremonies people would jump over the fires or run across the embers. These rituals were enacted to protect people, livestock and also dairy products, and all of the domestic fires were extinguished and relit from the Beltane fire to bring good fortune. Bannocks, traditional

Scottish bread made from oat flour, barley flour and buttermilk, were baked on the Beltane fire and shared amongst the community.

It was believed that, in particular, the eve of summer and the eve of winter were the two seasonal points during which the fairy folk were especially active. Folk belief held that the proximity of the otherworld to our own was greater at these points of change in the seasons and this closeness meant that the people had to guard against supernatural forces which could cross over to our world. Fairies are thought to linger in Celtic and other cultures as remnants of a belief in pagan gods and nature spirits, and spirits roam freely on the eve of Samhain [Sawin] Winter which is 31 October – modern Hallow'een – or all Hallows Eve, and the eve of Beltane Summer, which is 30 April. Fairies are known in Scots as the Guid Folk (folk to stay on the good side of!), sometimes they are otherwise known as the fey, or in Scots Gaelic, they are known as the sìth [the shee]. Offerings were therefore often made to stay on the good side of the shee, at Beltane food was offered (always anonymously!) from the Beltane feast to protect the cattle and their dairy products in the summer, this was to prevent them from being stolen or spoiled by the sìth. Offerings were also made to significant animals such as foxes, eagles, and wolves by throwing Bannocks into the Beltane fire. In addition, particular landscape features were thought to be enchanted portals to the otherworld, so called thin places, such as fairy hillocks (or *nemetons*) or singular, ancient hawthorn trees. Offerings to the sìth may therefore be left in these locations, and waters were taken for ritual protection from fairy wells.

At Beltane yellow flowers such as marsh marigold or gorse were used to decorate the home, cattle and equipment for making butter and cheese, this is thought to symbolise the fire of Beltane. The hawthorn, in Gaelic is *huathe* [hawtha], and is known culturally as the queen of trees. This tree is also known as the May and it flowers around Beltane, marking the onset of summer. Even when I was growing up as a child we knew the expression that you should never cast a *clout*, until the May is *oot*. Which means, keep your vest on until the Hawthorn blossoms! Lughnasa is the start of the harvesting season which falls on 01 August, mid way between the summer solstice and the autumn equinox. The rituals associated with Lughnasa include the first cutting of the grain crops – probably barley or oats – which was

used to make an offering in a high place such as a hill or mountain. There was also a ritual meal eaten which included blaeberrys, otherwise known as blueberries, or bilberries.

The shieling system was a highly efficient, if at times precarious, use of land for farming which relied upon the regular movement of grazing animals (cattle, sheep, goats and horses) across the landscape from pasture to pasture. Regular grazing enabled the grass to be manured and then left to grow again. Even in the high hills it is still possible to see areas of land which would have been shieling sites due to the presence of green grass in a sea of heather. The inter-relatedness of land use and livestock was also echoed in other forms of resource usage. The shieling was a vertical farm, or davoch, – see image of Kingussie. The davoch is a word often used to refer to a farm in the Badenoch and Strathspey area. It is in fact a Pictish Brythonic Celtic word referring to a unit of land measurement. Scottish land measurements tended to be determined by the amount of livestock that could be supported.

As David Taylor notes in his book *The Wild Black Region: Badenoch 1750-1800*:

The eighteenth century Badenoch farm was a closely integrated eco-system generally running in a narrow strip from river to distant mountain-top. It was this 'vertical' alignment that provided the essentials of self-sufficiency: the riverside for hay meadows and winter pasture; the natural terraces and lower slopes for arable and grass; the woodlands for timber, bark and pasture; the moorland for grazing, peat, turf and heather; the higher mountains for shielings.

(p.48)

The word shieling, is thought to come from the Old Norse for hut or shelter...but is also known as the *àiridh* in Scots Gaelic. The shieling was built of stone from the hillsides and its roof was made of timber covered with turf or peat. The majority of the floor area was taken up for sleeping and heather was harvested from the hillsides to form a natural mattress for comfort. More modern shielings resembled rectangular huts and were built with gable ends and fireplaces. However, shielings that were still in use as late as the early twentieth century in the Westerns Isles were built using construction methods which would have been found

in prehistory. Beehive shielings would have been built in areas where there was no wood available to make a roof structure. These beehive structures were used by early hunter gatherers, Celtic monks and as shielings.

At the high pasture various activities were undertaken, such as spinning and dyeing yarn using foraged plants and lichens. Singing and storytelling, knitting, tending to the livestock and making butter and cheese. During the warmer months at the high pasture, butter was often stored in barrels or baskets and buried in the peat bog to keep it fresh. 3,500 year old bog butter has been found that is still edible, if a little funky! So, burying it to preserve it is certainly a compelling theory although other thoughts include caching it due to its value which fluctuated dependent upon the weather conditions of a season – one season may produce abundance yet another might be leaner in terms of productivity. Additionally, there has also been speculation about whether butter was buried to enhance its flavour. [See Nordic Food Lab, *Bog butter: A Gastronomic Perspective*, by Ben Reade.]

In our local workshop for the Arctic Connections Fund, Gabby and I were concerned to uncover how and what can we learn from the culture of the shieling? Important to us was its multi-faceted culture – argri-culture, the culture of food – specifically cultured foods such as cheese – and cultural activities such as song and story, dyeing and knitting. All of these cultures seemed to pivot around the productivity and movement through the landscape; the human and nonhuman dwelling in, on and through it.

Gabby will talk in a bit more detail about the design of the experience, but by way of a preliminary introduction I would like to say that we were both keen to explore the idea of the sense-scape, which emerged from previous work that explored the idea of the landscape as a kind of taste-scape which threads through time and place, a materialisation of affect and memory. Thinking of the taste of the landscape also speaks of the edible wild plants that can be found in the landscape, such as gorse and wild sorrel. We were interested through the workshop to try to bring the historic landscape to life. As such we were motivated to engage our participants in an experience, which we called Sensing the Storied Landscape, through multimodality which engaged different literacies, but crucially opened up an imaginative space to explore the historic practice of transhumance. We engaged the

imagination via storytelling (the auditory), spatial design in thinking through the space of learning, laid out to approximate the journey through the landscape, and we used visual design through the development of supporting materials such as posters and a pictorial representation of the butter making process, linguistic learning was engaged through developing a glossary of Scots words which we made available to the participants. This use of multi-modal elements in the experience aimed to engage the students in an emotional and imaginary journey through the use of language and the imagination to elicit an immersive sensory response which Gabby will talk to in a little more detail in a moment.