

A man in outdoor gear, including a hat, jacket, and backpack, stands on a grassy hill overlooking a coastline. He is holding a long wooden staff with a hook at the top. The background shows a blue sea and green hills under a cloudy sky.

THIS JEWELLED ISLE

How the people of a
beautiful Scottish island
got their land back
By Harry Mount

PHOTOGRAPHED BY MURDO MACLEOD

Resident and community
trust member Sean Morris
at Harris, on the Isle of Rum

The red phone box on the edge of Loch Scresort is a hot contender for the most romantic, isolated call box in Britain. In one direction its little window panes look across a bay full of oystercatchers to the grey-blue mountains of the Isle of Skye. In the other, it looks back to Kinloch Castle, a much-crenellated, orangey-brown, late-Victorian pile. Once the plaything of a Lancashire industrialist millionaire, Sir George Bullough, it is now the grandest youth hostel on earth.

The only sound is the mournful whoop of those oystercatchers and the shocked-old-lady cry of the eiders. And, beyond the castle, there lies the isle of Rum (some call it Rhum, avoiding jokes about dead men's chests and rum coves). The 26,400 acres of green, scree-flanked cuillins (the local word for mountains), criss-crossed with glens, waterfalls and lochs, constitute one of the last British wildernesses, the biggest of a group of four islands in the Inner Hebrides called the Small Isles.

Among its residents are 1,000 deer—subject, since 1972, to the longest continuous mammal-study scheme in history and recent stars of the BBC's *Autumnwatch*—and 200,000 manx shearwaters, a third of the world population. Their guano is so thick that it has turned the earth above their barrows a deep, fertile green. During the breeding season, these birds spend their days at sea, their scythe-shaped wings almost cutting the water, hence their name. At night, the shearwaters land with a thump before scurrying

clumsily into their burrows in the mountains above Kinloch. Their eerie, cooing call led the ancient Norse residents to think trolls lived up there; one of Rum's mountains is still called Trollaval (Troll Hill).

Things haven't changed much on Rum since Norse days, except that there are now fewer human beings. In 1796, the population of the island was 445. Now there are a mere 31 permanent residents, their numbers periodically swollen by the hillwalkers who bed down under the eaves of Kinloch Castle in the servants' attic quarters. Those 31 residents are mostly made up of wardens for Scottish Natural Heritage, the charity that was given the island for £1 an acre in 1957 by Lady Bullough.

But now, in a development that has been cheered across the Hebrides, the island's only village, Kinloch, a pretty group of whitewashed crofts nestling round the castle, has been given to those wardens—for absolutely nothing. Revolutionary changes of land ownership like this are taking place all across the chain of islands strung along Britain's 6,000-mile-long coastline.

In 1997, the neighbouring island of Eigg was sold to the Isle of Eigg Heritage Trust, acting on behalf of the islanders. In 2006, the puffin and storm petrel haven of Skokholm, off the west coast of Pembrokeshire, was sold to the Welsh Wildlife Trust after 350 years in the same family.

When it comes to Rum, there have been two problems with its otherwise romantic story: money and people. And



Rum local Lesley Watt with her pony Harvey on the beach at Kinloch

now those two problems are to be solved for the first time in the island's 7,500 years of human habitation. At the moment, Rum's large Gothic school by the ferry port has only four children. But a further two are already on the way. And, under the Scottish Natural Heritage plan, a Rum-based community trust will run the five crofts next to Kinloch Castle to help generate income and attract more residents and families. "Now Rum is cooking on gas. In a year, the island will hopefully be cooking on hydropower instead—just one of the obvious changes islanders are starting to explore," says Lesley Riddoch, the journalist and broadcaster in charge of the Rum Task Force that co-ordinated the scheme, "Housing is

the key. And already there are ecstatic grins from islanders who've moved from cramped conditions to bigger, renovated properties."

From now on, Scottish Natural Heritage and the Scottish government accept that human development on Rum will happen at the community's pace and will reflect their choices. This will mean hard work. But the prize is a future where human and physical ecology develop apace and Rum can emerge from two silent centuries with a viable population, as a mainstay of the rejuvenated Small Isles community.

An injection of fresh blood makes for a sea change in the island's history—a history, for the most part, of tragic

departures. For all its rugged allure, Rum has not been well constructed by nature for human habitation. A belt of beeches and wych elms surround Kinloch Castle, survivors of a mid-19th-century planting. But otherwise the island is mostly bracken, bog, rock and river, fertile ground only for the scourge of the Highlands and Islands: the midge. Midges love rain and there's a lot of it on Rum. The mountains trap a good chunk of the stuff coming in from across the Atlantic. It then sluices down the mountainside in brown, peaty burns that cut across the overgrown hill paths and the track that skirts the coast round Kinloch. Stand on top of a



Rum cuillin and you can see the rain moving away from you in waves, carried across the bay.

Ever since man first came to Rum in 5500BC, he has battled with its inhospitable nature. Until this latest scheme, the island has always won, and the owners and their poor tenants have fled or been ruthlessly evicted. Signs of a fleeting human presence are scattered across the island—beehive dwellings, Iron Age forts, two seventh-century cross stones and a Norwegian burial site—but not a single descendant of these old inhabitants is on the island today.

The longest period of sustained occupancy was for 400 years from the 1400s, when the Macleans of Coll farmed with the help of workers housed in 400 shielings, the simple stone-built local houses. When cattle prices fell after the Napoleonic Wars, Dr Alexander Maclean “cleared” all but one tenant to Nova Scotia—8,000 black-faced sheep took their place. The weeping of the islanders could be heard from one end of Rum to the other. From then on, Rum was known as the Forbidden Island.

In 1845, the Marquess of Salisbury bought the island, stocked it with red deer and Rum began its life as a



Kinloch Castle, built by the Bullough family; (below) some of the diverse artefacts collected by Sir George Bullough

classic Scottish sporting estate. He later handed it over to his brother, the third marquess and prime minister, before it was sold to the Bulloughs in 1888.

These days, a not-unpleasing air of neglect still hangs over the island. The castle has been left just as it was after the Bulloughs left in 1957, as if they had stepped out into the gloaming for an evening stroll and never returned. The hand-embroidered, silk wallpapers are slowly shrinking with the damp; enormous tropical fish caught on a tropical pre-war cruise are still nailed to the wall, a little moth-eaten; the 1906 pianola still cranks out a creaky waltz; the ballroom with its little minstrel's

gallery for the band has not heard music for some time.

The faded charm of this forgotten island world spreads beyond the castle gates. An overgrown kitchen garden has been given over to pigs, foals and a rusting Nissen hut, sheltering farm equipment. The roads round the island are only negotiable by Land Rover. And even a Land Rover takes an hour to tackle the nine miles of broken track to Harris on the other side of the island, where the only resident humans are dead ones. Harris is dominated by the Bullough mausoleum, a Tuscan temple where the last Bullough—Monica, Lady Bullough—was buried in 1967,

aged 98. Even in the boom years of the Bulloughs, oceans of money weren't enough to flatten the roads. The metal skeleton of one of Sir George's ruined sportsters lies by the side of the road to Kilmorey, where the Bulloughs kept their laundry.

Some deserted hamlets don't even have roads to them, broken or not. One such hamlet on the coast near

Kinloch—now the breeding spot of seagulls and oystercatchers—is called Port of the Turnings because no one stayed there long. That sad history of turnings is coming to an end, with the prospect of islanders staying on beyond a single generation for the first time in half a century. “It will be wonderful for me to say to my eight-year-old daughter that she will not have to leave the island where she was

brought up when I retire,” said Fliss Hough, chairman of the Rum Community Association.

As well as their castle, the Bulloughs left behind another magnificent legacy that will invigorate Rum's future: the quarter of a million tons of Ayrshire soil they imported a century ago to fertilise the land round the castle. It is here, on the only real level bit of land on the island, that the five crofts have been

marked out for the new generation of Rum immigrants. Just in front of that patch of land is Rum's port, where the Caledonian MacBrayne ferry drops off and picks up residents and hillwalkers four days a week. The idea of it dropping off more people than it picks up on a permanent basis, for the first time in living memory, has inundated this distant island outpost with a tide of tremendous hope. ●



Wild red deer hinds and calves on the north of Rum, with the Isle of Skye on the horizon