

DOWNHILL FROM THE BAY OF STRANGERS

Plans to close a tiny island school in the Inner Hebrides could lead to the island's second depopulation in fifty years. Closure will save £207 a year for a council with an annual spend of £320 million. Iain Fraser Grigor reports.

THE LITTLE isle of Soay lies like a green jewel under the black frown of the Cuillin mountains. It is a small island even by Hebridean standards - just two miles wide and perhaps twice as long. On its south side is the Bay of the Strangers where the Vikings used to haul their longships a thousand years or so ago. And on the opposite side is the magical little North Harbour, tucked tightly into the land and sheltered from anything the stormy Minch might throw at it.

On the isthmus between, the trees - birch, oak, rowan and alder - grow thickly. They shelter herons and the odd raven that might lazily flap down from the summits, half a mile away across the sound that separates Soay from neighbouring Skye.

It is hard to believe that Soay's 2,560 acres were bought as recently as 1980 for just £100 by a doctor in Kent who didn't know that the island was subject to crofting law, and who resold it all in 1993 for an undisclosed sum.

But that's Soay: as full of surprises as it is of delights. It was here, after all, that a famous shark-fishing venture was launched in the postwar years by the writer Gavin Maxwell. A steam locomotive was taken by rail and boat all the way from London to power the processing plant - and its rusting boiler still stands among the trees at North

Harbour. The Highland pony Eilidh, which featured in the television series *Castaway 2000*, was one of a herd which was originally reared on Soay by Tex Geddes, who had been Maxwell's harpoonist during the late 1940s. And it is here that the world's first solar-powered telephone exchange is to be found, servicing the (somewhat limited) telephonic communication needs of the island's permanent residents.

And it is here too that a row is centred - a row with implications for tiny communities across the land. The row also has implications for the extent to which the wider community is responsible for these remote, tiny and often desperately fragile communities which still distinguish the quieter parts of Scotland and England and Wales.

For Soay - the name derives from the Old Norse for sheep-island - has just seven permanent residents, all of them adults. The last children left the island three years ago, to pursue their secondary education on the 'mainland' of Skye. There are, therefore, at present no children on the island. And the education authority - knowing a good chance when it sees one - wants, therefore, to close for ever the single-room school that has served the island for 122 years.

This will save Highland Council the sum of exactly £207 per annum (not counting £123 in council tax, which is defrayed by the council anyway on account of Soay's remoteness).

And Soay is nothing if not remote. There aren't any regular scheduled transport services to the island at all. To get there, a boat must be chartered specially from either Elgol on Skye, 4 miles away, or the fishing port of Mallaig, 15 miles distant. Otherwise, transport services consist in winter of one visit every three months by a mailboat from Arisaig.

Opposite Soay on Skye are precipitous and trackless mountains, where the peaks rise over 3,000 feet. The concept of a causeway, such as recently linked Eriskay with South Uist in the Outer Hebrides, is an irrelevancy here. The nearest pub is at the Sligachan Hotel on Skye, 9 miles away across the roughest mountain terrain in Britain. There is no shop on Soay, no mains electricity, no road of any sort. There isn't even a jetty; islanders and visitors alike must scramble up the shingle beach at the Bay of the Strangers just the way the Vikings did all those centuries ago.

But there was a school on Soay as long ago as 1878. It was built there a few years after the Scotch Education Act made primary schooling compulsory for every child north of the Border. And it is still there: a detached building with a pitched slate roof, and a single classroom which has witnessed over the years a transition from bare feet and the Lochgelly belt to pupils' rights and designer trainers.

It ran without fault as a school until the 1950s, when it closed for want of pupils. It re-opened again in 1978, and operated until just three years ago, usually with between one and three pupils on the roll. But it has been empty since 1997.

In the words of Highland Council's official report, 'Overall the school is totally unsuitable for the modern curriculum as well as present-day health and safety standards'. According to the report, the cost of refurbishment would be £105,000, and the cost of a jetty, a water supply and a fire-fighting scheme could, 'double this amount without difficulty'.

As the official report blandly observes: 'The Council would save on the following costs if Soay primary school was closed and declared surplus to requirements:

1. Property insurance.	£ 97
2. Telephones, office, fixed	£ 80
3. Indurance, Admin.	£ 30
TOTAL	£207.'

In other words: the cost of keeping Soay school on its present basis is £3.85 per week: and this for an agency with an annual spend of £320 million!

Worse than the scarcely believable parsimony of the council's accountancy is that it overlooks the critical role played by a school in any small community. Put simply, without a school there are no children. Any family with children on the island in future will have to leave, if these children are to be schooled according to law. And no family with children will ever move to Soay, when there is no school for them there. So without children - sooner or later - there is no community, and the island is emptied of people. This has happened before on Soay, after all.

From the 13th century up till 1946, when Maxwell bought the island, Soay was the property of the MacLeods of Dunvegan - the people who are presently trying to sell the Cuillins for £10 million. During the 19th century Highland Clearances on Skye, a hundred evicted crofters settled on the little island. In 1851, it had a population

of 158. But thereafter it was downhill all the way. And by 1953, the population was just 27.

In the style of St Kilda, which had been emptied with official assistance 20 years earlier, Soay was evacuated in the high summer of that Coronation Year. Twenty seven men, women and children (along with twelve cows and 150 hens) were shipped by government steamer to new homes and lives on the island of Mull, fifty miles to the south. To welcome them there was none other than the Earl of Home, Minister of State for Scottish Affairs and a future prime minister of the UK as Sir Alec Douglas Home.

The reasons given for the evacuation were the failure of the shark fishery, the decline of lobster stocks in the surrounding sea, the thin and sterile soil, the absolute absence of public services, and steadily falling manpower. The Secretary of State had earlier sent officials to assess conditions on the island, and - in his words - 'acceded to the islanders' plea to be moved out at public expense'.

To anyone who knows anything of the history of public administration in the Highlands of Scotland, of course, this may be as clear a description of bribery funded from the public pocket and self-serving bureaucratic convenience as can be imagined.

The evacuation occasioned massive public interest, as a touch of colour in the prim post-war years, and no platitude was left unturned in the search for stoic old pipers, puzzled old cows dangling from cranes, kilted old crones grimly clinging to bedsteads, and in general every Hebridean cliché ever employed by Her Majesty's Press before or since.

This time too, the threat of total depopulation is serious. But this time, the islanders are prepared to fight for the survival of their little island home, prepared to fight the closure for good of their little one-roomed school, and the cultural vandalism that closure represents.

The islanders point out that in any very small community, the numbers of children can be cyclical, as it has been on Soay over the last fifty years. And they say that the Highland Council's figures just don't compute. The island has never had a jetty, in the first place, and the islanders cannot imagine what any new jetty would have to do with educational provision on Soay.

Nor do they understand a figure of £50,000 for an electricity-generating set for the school, when the job could be done for a tenth of that. Repairs to the school's water supply could also be done for a fraction of what the council is claiming. Even more ridiculous, it looks to islanders as if the council is budgeting £50,000 for a single fire-door on the ground-floor schoolroom.

For its part, the Council is conducting an obligatory consultation with interested parties. Initially, the deadline for those consultations was January 6th. Just before Christmas, however, it graciously let it be known that the period for consultation had been extended until the end of January.

But islanders remain doubtful and alarmed. One is Oliver Davies, a fisherman who has lived on the island for 32 years, and whose children were the last to attend the island school. His view of the matter is simple.

'For the island, the proposal for the final closure of the school represents the worst possible Christmas for us, the worst possible

Hogmanay for us. This could be one of our little community's last New Years here. Without a school, there's no children - and without children, there's no hope. It's as simple as that'.

For: Scottish Daily Express.