

FAILTE GU LA NOUVELLE DORDOGNE

As a tidal wave of wealthy White Settlers and holiday-homers pours into the old Rough Bounds of west Lochaber, Iain Fraser Grigor asks - how long now till there is no room left for the native Highlander?

ONCE IT WAS known as the most Highland area of mainland Scotland - the old Jacobite na Garbh Chrìochan or Rough Bounds of west Lochaber, arcing in a gracious crescent from Ardnamurchan in the south to the soft lands of Morar and the fishing port of Mallaig in the north.

But in the last decade a property-price tsunami has rolled north across the Highlands, powered by the long, hot housing boom in the distant Home Counties of southern England.

And if it goes on much longer - locals are now beginning to urgently ask - then for how much longer will the indigenous population of the area withstand the pressures of wealth, and the irresistible purchasing-power that marches with it hand in hand?

The problem is not just one of rich White Settlers moving up, and in, for good and driving property prices sky-high in the process. Many properties in the area are already holiday homes, empty for much of the year - while locals look on in silent wonder.

And for locals with the cash to self-build their own houses, meantime, they face a savage shortage of land for such development - almost incredible in a district with an average population density of four people per square mile. Incredible, perhaps - but true.

Charlie King, Highland Council member for the Mallaig and Morar area bluntly says, 'Where do you want me to begin? There is nowhere in this area where housing is not needed. We need accommodation for local people, we need to be able to open-up sites for self-build. We have many local young people in this area who could self-build their own home but land prices are extortionate'.

King says that in his council ward alone, two-thirds of rented public housing has now passed to the private sector, thanks to Tory right-to-buy policies - although he adds, 'It was not such a bad thing here, as the houses were generally bought by members of the immediate family. But it has had a terrible effect in some other districts'.

And he goes on, 'We must get land to build on, whether for affordable houses or self-build, it's a massive problem really. We are building 18 affordable houses in Mallaig and another four in Morar, and are in negotiations with the local landowner to get another 18 in Arisaig - we will fill them all instantly with local people. The problem is, the incomers have more money than the locals. It's happening all over the Highlands. It is nothing for someone in London to sell a house for £500,000, and get one up here - if you are lucky - for £200,000. So you have £300,000 to spare - it's better than a pension for these people. Of course local people don't have a hope of getting a house'.

King's comments follow a surge in property prices in the Highlands, where there are an astonishing 9,000 people on the list for rented housing.

In the picturesque village of Plockton, just a few miles to the north of Mallaig, over half the houses are holiday homes. While

there are almost 50 people on the local housing list, and the primary school role has halved from 80 to 39 in just six years, a former council house was recently offered for sale at offers over £300,000.

To the south, more than 2000 new houses to buy and rent are needed in Argyll and Bute in next five years. On Mull (nicknamed The Officers' Mess in the 'seventies on account of its prominent White Settler population) the situation is particularly serious. House prices on the island have soared by a staggering 50% in the last year alone.

One third of the houses on the island are holiday-homes (though some may belong to locals forced to work off the island), while one fifth of the population lives in 'temporary' accommodation. And while over 4% live 'rent-free' (ie. invisible homelessness), no less than half of the council-houses on Mull have been lost through 'right to buy'.

In Morar, meanwhile, just to the south of Mallaig, 45% of the houses are already holiday-homes or occupied by elderly locals - prompting the question, what happens to the village when their houses come on the property market? And the village's mainly-Gaelic (and extremely-successful) primary school is also under threat of closure.

'Primitive hunter-gatherer people would need a population density to survive here of about two people per square kilometre', says Mairi MacLean, chair of Morar community council. 'We have four - so that shows how far down the economic scale we really are.

'I agree that some of the White Settlers are responsible for putting the final nail in the coffin of dying Highland villages. Our politicians just think there is something wrong with our confidence, while White Settlers think there is something backward in our

mentality and that they just need to apply a Home Counties bandage to make us better.

‘Our landed gentry were responsible for all of this in the beginning and many of the White Settlers are only too happy to continue in this vein - once they have settled here they think it’s their duty to stop all development.

‘They buy up scarce properties, live off their capital and pensions and have no need to see the area flourish to accommodate the young up-and-coming whom they have displaced’.

And in Arisaig - where locals joke that the welcome sign in Gaelic at the entrance to the village F`ilte gu Arasaig should now be replaced by a sign saying Failte gu la nouvelle Dordogne - the situation is especially critical.

Economic - and cultural - conflict is nothing new in Arisaig, of course. In the 19th century, the landlords here were especially dreadful. As the minutes of the famous Crofters’ Royal Commission from the middle of the 1880s make clear, a reign of terror characterised their concept of ‘estate-management’ from the beginning.

The commission heard evidence from the famously radical Church of Scotland minister Donald MacCallum. MacCallum (who would later serve a weekend in gaol in Skye for Land League activities) told of the fearful record of eviction from the district, which had emptied the nearby Rhu peninsula of people. As MacCallum said, ‘One does not like to say that these English have a positive hatred to the native Highlander, but there is something at the bottom of it’.

According to the Highland Council's census returns of 2001, Arisaig's population was in that year just 442 people - down 5% on ten years earlier. One quarter of the population had not been born in Scotland, and of the occupied houses, half were owner-occupied and the other half rented. Holiday and vacant homes in the village totalled no less than 20% of the total housing stock - compared to a Highland average of 10% and a Scottish average of 5%.

And meantime, in the village where the great Gaelic poet Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair finds his last resting place, asking prices of desirable houses are said to be soaring towards the £300,000 mark.

As one close observer of the local scene said, 'It is not just an economic issue here, it is a cultural one. Some incomers are worthy additions to any community, and there are those here. But historically, Arisaig's cultural affinity with the Home Counties is somewhat limited. So, for much of the time, it is a bad mix. They bring their commodity value-system here, have their dinner parties and admire the scenery - but they are as alien to the spirit of the old Rough Bounds as the colonial White Settlers ever were to Africa'.

And southward into Moidart and Ardnamurchan, meantime, the situation is worse, with the proportion of people not born in Scotland rising to one-third, and the proportion of vacant and holiday homes also at one third.

Michael Foxley, councillor for the district (and vice-convenor of Highland Council), says there is a huge problem with housing in his area. At least half of the houses in west Ardnamurchan are holiday homes for starters, he says.

And he adds, 'Land for new-build is fantastically expensive for locals. A quarter-acre site without services costs between £50,000

and £100,000 here. You certainly won't get anything for less than £40,000. Locals don't have a hope. I mean, how will you ever get a house if you are a local person employed in minimum-wage seasonal hotel work?'

Foxley says that not even key workers like teachers can afford a house now in the district he represents. He adds that at the moment there is one house on sale in Strontian at offers over £330,000 - or one third of a million pounds.

'You can see how it is happening', he says. 'I know someone in London who is living in a house worth one or two million. He got his first house 20 years ago for £12,000 and sold it for £50,000. He got his second for £100,000 and now its worth at least £1.5 million.

'There are tens of thousands of people like him', adds Foxley. 'So if you sell your place for £1 million and buy a house here for £300,000 you still have £700,000 to play with. How can locals compete with that? Of course it is a cultural issue as well as an economic one'.

And meantime, solutions are few and far between. Highland Council insists that any new-build development contains at least one-quarter affordable homes for locals. The Scottish Executive might abolish right-to-buy for new tenancies in public housing. And Highland Council wants to to charge 90% council tax on holiday homes (though Foxley himself favoured a punitive rate of 200%).

And meantime too, the tidal-wave of settlers and holidays homes, rolls ever onwards and upwards

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