



# CRAIGENGILLAN ESTATE

WHERE NATURE'S MAGIC GROWS



A Vision and 5 Year Plan



**CRAIGENGILLAN ESTATE  
‘WHERE NATURE’S MAGIC GROWS’**

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**CRAIGENGILLAN ESTATE**  
**'WHERE NATURE'S MAGIC GROWS'**

**INTRODUCTION by Mark Gibson OBE**

Twenty years ago I stumbled upon the 3000 acre Craigengillan Estate, a forgotten fold of British history, hidden between East Ayrshire's rugged hilltops and screened behind years of neglect. The neighbouring village of Dalmellington is a former coal mining community, hard hit by the closure of the mines a generation earlier but with spirit and talent. Its life and that of Craigengillan are closely interwoven.



Today, after two decades of hard work, Craigengillan is an award-winning estate. Its 3,000 acres of new native woodland, pasture, wetlands, heaths and lochs are thriving. Using methods steeped in centuries of tradition coupled with modern innovation, we administer interests including an organic sheep farm, notable riding stables, idyllic holiday cottages and responsible forestry. We are home to the Scottish Dark Sky Observatory and Fort Carrick

My underlying vision is to build on the importance of Craigengillan in history and in the present and to enable it to become a model for the future. It should be a prestigious and successful undertaking, the outcomes of which will I hope influence beyond our boundaries. I hope that as many people and organisations as possible may support the plan and become part of our story, helping us work towards a legacy worth remembering and a present the community can be proud of.

**BACKGROUND & SUMMARY**

This paper is a personal statement by me. After the achievements of the last 19 years it is an attempt to bring them together and build on them to create a lasting legacy well beyond my lifetime; one that will make a difference. It is an attempt to record what we have and what may be done.

Set amidst the hills of the Southern Uplands of Scotland some 14 miles from the sea, Craigengillan is surrounded by one of the most beautiful of landscapes, and one with a fascinating history. It was first established as an estate in 1580, when it encompassed over 30,000 acres and stretched as far as Carsphairn.



The founding family were the McAdams, and their descendants remained the proprietors until 1999, when I purchased the estate. I embarked on a carefully planned restoration programme, a policy of encouraging public access and major works to protect and enhance the landscape and the nature conservation interest.

**Management Philosophy**

- The restoration and preservation of the listed buildings and the Designed Landscape;
- The long-term viability of the estate and its part in the wider community;



- The welfare of the farmed animals;
- The conservation and enhancement of habitats and the wild flora and fauna which inhabit them.



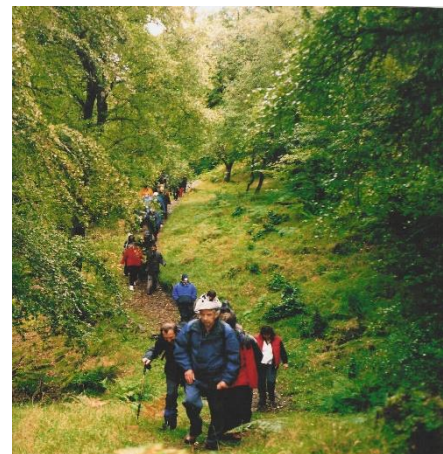
*Ness Glen 1875*



*Ness Glen 2018*

- To make the estate self-sufficient. It is only then that it is truly safe and sustainable and thus a model;
- To act as a catalyst for the economic and environmental regeneration of the Doon Valley and beyond.

In collaboration with East Ayrshire Council and other stakeholders, the chosen way forward is a future based on green and cultural tourism and outdoor activities.



The principle of the UNESCO Biosphere in which we are situated is the mutual benefit to man and the natural world that comes from us caring for nature and our landscapes; it creates a sure foundation for long term sustainable development.



In my dream of the future I see the establishment at Craigen Gillan of a centre of environmental excellence within the UNESCO Biosphere.

It will be a place to give the kind of learning and experience to fit those taking advantage of it to become good citizens of the world, bringing self-worth and confidence and working with nature to create a happy and prosperous future. The fulfilment of the dream could well take another two

generations, but we will make a very good start and lay a firm and lasting foundation.



Down the years you will find every kind of practical and artistic venture. Today's thousand acres of young native trees and woodland glades will be maturing, each year the fertility and structure of the soil will get better, and with it will come an ever greater biodiversity and a web of natural systems. Instead of lifeless monocultures of sitka spruce, the woods will be home to myriad species of flowering plants, mosses, ferns, birds, red squirrels, dragonflies and butterflies.



Within the woods will be foresters, wood craft makers, charcoal burners and many more. There will be life where before there was little. The organic sheep and cattle enterprise will continue to thrive and I hope it will be possible to sell the lambs locally and avoid stressful transport for them.



The whole countryside will become a place of positive and happy activity, with people working together.







Craigengillan can perhaps be the physician to help heal wounds. Although it will be a peaceful place, all the strength and spirit will stay. It will be one big orchard (the original meaning of 'man and nature's garden') with every kind of enterprise within it, working with nature and living by the principles of the UNESCO Biosphere. It will inspire beyond its boundaries.

It will be a strange transformation we will have wrought and I sometimes thank Providence that sometimes has seemed to have guided us/me so far. I hope and trust that "the wilderness and the solitary place will be glad for us". I will do my best to fulfil the vision. If it doesn't happen it won't be from lack of trying.

*"Come let us stray our gladsome way,  
And view the charms of Nature;  
The rustling corn, the fruited thorn,  
And ilka happy creature." Robert Burns*





## **THE PROJECT**

To build on Craigengillan's natural assets and the work achieved over the last 20 years to contribute to a new future for Dalmellington, the Doon Valley and further into East Ayrshire. This new future to be focussed on nature and cultural tourism and outdoor activities.

To make Craigengillan a Centre of Environmental Excellence within the UNESCO Biosphere, to create sustainable employment and to further raise the reputation of East Ayrshire.

There are six principal elements to the project:

### **1. THE UNESCO BIOSPHERE AND DARK SKY FIELD CENTRE**

To be situated on the U759 road from the A713 to Loch Doon.

The building, to be constructed of timber under a steep pitch thatch roof, to accommodate:

- Information and interpretation for visitors.
- Accommodation for rangers.
- Field laboratory facilities. There continues to be a growing number of people and organisations recording the natural world and undertaking research within the Biosphere and Dark Sky Park. Subjects include flowering plants, mosses and ferns, geology, moths, bats, dragonflies, amphibians (including great crested newts) and birds. Nearly all work in isolation at the moment. The field laboratory would provide not only a base but also a centre for sharing information and ideas.
- Learning and Interpretation space, including a lecture room.
- A gallery to exhibit and offer for sale the work of talented local artists and craft makers.
- Nocturnal Zoo. At the Observatory, one of the messages we try to send is the importance of protecting dark skies, not just for astronomers but because more than half the earth's fauna is nocturnal and light pollution wreaks havoc with animal behaviour, life cycles and navigation. We would like to develop a nocturnal zoo adjacent to the Field Centre. This would not only help to get the essential message across but be a strong visitor attraction in itself.
- Rural skills centre.



- Nature Re-connect.

- In time, we would like to develop the centre further to become a northern gateway to the Galloway Forest Park. At the moment over 80% of visitors to the park access it from the south. Such a northern gateway would connect with the populations of Glasgow and the central belt, and unlock the potential for a huge increase in visitor numbers, to the benefit of East Ayrshire as well as the Forest Park.
- Key aspects are location and access. One good possible site at Craigengillan would be the approach road to Loch Doon, within an area of open ancient woodland with views through to the loch. The drawback of being reached by a single track road could be solved by opening up the forest road to Eriff on the A713 and establishing a one-way traffic system. The Centre would be within walking distance of Ness Glen, Fort Carrick and the Observatory.



## 2. NATURE RE-CONNECT

Since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution nearly two centuries ago and the consequent increase in urban living, there has developed a break between man and his place in the natural world. This disconnection has intensified in the last 25 years, particularly with the advent of second hand life centred on mobile phones, tablets and laptops. There is a need and a growing desire for an outdoor nature based experience (a technology de-tox) for all ages.



This could take the form of one day or longer courses. For the longer courses, the accommodation described elsewhere would be ideal. The Field Centre or a separate building of rustic design nearby could offer a warm and dry space suitable for teaching about nature, maps of walks, illustrations of the flora and fauna to be found

here and the opportunity for basic refreshment. Marker stones could pin-point sunrise, sunset and equinoxes.



- It is possible that the re-connect programme could be delivered by suitably knowledgeable, inspired and charismatic rangers/guides, as referred to in the Field Centre section of this paper. From my experience with nature tourism in Zimbabwe, such a person can fire the imagination and make the story of a termite as exciting as coming across a lion, a humble beetle as exciting as a golden eagle.
- The course would in effect be experiential learning; something difficult to achieve in the school classroom.
- The nearby Scottish Dark Sky Observatory will be a valuable asset, teaching us about man's place within the Universe and connecting us with the heavens and all the other countries of the world.



- We will show how nature and natural landscapes can be a foundation for new employment:
  - wildlife photography



- rangers/guides/instructors
- creative writing
- art
- story telling (computer technology and mobiles have made us inarticulate and taken away our powers of imagination)
- farming with nature



### 3. RURAL SKILLS CENTRE

John MacAdam, the great road engineer, was also a great proponent of dry stone dyking. In the 1780's he created at Craigenkillan a school of dyking, to which people came from all over Scotland



Before repair



After repair

to learn. We plan to develop a 21<sup>st</sup> century equivalent, teaching not only dry stone dyking, but also:

- Joinery.
- Thatching.
- Development of Ranger Skills.
- Hedge Creation and Laying.
- Tree Planting and Woodland Management.
- Green Woodworking, including hurdle, basket, bark vessels and chair making and pole-lathe and shave horse building.
- Natural History Identification.
- Practical Conservation.
- Wildlife Photography and its potential for new employment.
- Survival and Fieldcraft Skills.
- Star Navigation.
- Archaeology, including the possibility of building a Crannog to compliment the ancient one in Bogton Loch. This would be a great experiential project, combining archaeology and history with stone and joinery skills training with a wildlife viewing centre within an SSSI. This could be a collaborative effort involving a university archaeology department.





- Horse logging.



- Charcoal Burning.
- Tree Climbing.
- Woodland Sculpture
- Blacksmithing.

An example of the success of such an enterprise is the Big Tree Society in the Scottish Borders. The courses there are fully booked for all of 2019.

There are great opportunities for the development of rural skills and these would accord with the principles of the Biosphere. The training would not only benefit those taking part and help them to create self-employment, but would also be based on the construction and restoration of landmarks of the historic Designed Landscape.

Skills training would be led by experienced and charismatic instructors with a belief in the overall vision. As time goes by, the wish would be for as many as possible of the course leaders to come from nearby communities so that they become the masters of their own destiny.

A key message throughout will be: 'Believe In Yourself – You Can Do It, Achieve Your Own Dream and Do Not Find Excuses For Not Doing So'.

The Rural Skills Centre could either be in or near the Field Centre, the accommodation buildings or based at Fort Carrick. Development of the latter could be part of the skills training, giving it a practical and achievable outcome. The Army use Craigengillan regularly for training and have expressed an interest in becoming involved.



#### 4. CYCLE HUB

Following attendance at a very good seminar organised by Julie Sloan, then of East Ayrshire Council, a year ago, we have given much thought to the possibility of creating a really good cycle hub here, including a state of the art Mountain Biking Course, to rival the Forestry Commission's "7 Stanes" to the south.



The seminar revealed:

261,000 overnight cycle tourism visitor trips a year.

122,000 overnight mountain biking visitor trips a year.

Huge potential for a cycle hub in Dalmellington. Main season is April – October, but mountain biking more all year round.



Cyclists need:

- Somewhere safe and dry to store bikes overnight.
- Local information and leaflets/maps showing routes, places of interest along the way, grading of routes for different levels of ease/hardness.
- Accommodation - Perhaps bunkhouse in the old mill and possibly some pods at Craigengillan. See separate Accommodation Section of this paper.
- Provision of services - arrival and departure times etc. Coffee and cakes are a draw. Possible liaison with Bacas, Jet Station, Roundhouse and others.
- Time off the bikes as important as on.
- There is e-biking potential for the less fit.

Other interests good to focus on - local history including the lost villages, the observatory, the possibility of us creating a nocturnal zoo, Burns associations, Pilgrims Route. Emphasise carbon footprint.



Useful people and subjects to research further:

- Ayrshire Alps - designed around 4 villages with cafes, shops and parking. A good example of what we can do much better here.
- Cycle Tourism Fund.
- Lorraine McCallum (MD of Scottish Cycling)
- Sustrans (£ for EAC for path development e.g. rail link to Patna).
- STRAVA Heatmap
- Cycle Hub
- The new EAC access officer.
- A Rankin re Nicola Sturgeon's new £6 million pot for cycle tourism (CRUCIALLY IMPORTANT!)
- Rick Allsorp. Has 'Rick's Bike Shed' at Drumlanrig (07883 88175)
- Danny MacAskill.
- Active Outdoors Pursuits ([www.activeoutdoorpursuits.com](http://www.activeoutdoorpursuits.com)). Their involvement would be a great boost.
- Alan Rankin (coigachconsulting.com)
- Involvement of local schools.

Following a successful application by The Zone, we have received a small grant to cover the cost of an initial assessment by Architrails, a respected specialist in the design and operation of mountain bike courses. Their initial assessment is positive. Further funding will allow them to proceed with a detailed design and business plan.

A successful outcome will create an opportunity to develop a project that fits the principles of the UNESCO Biosphere and attract great numbers of visitors to the area. In addition to direct employment, there will be potential to deliver indirect employment, as set out elsewhere in this paper.

The proposed site for the mountain bike element of the Cycle Hub is Auchenroy Hill, on Craigengillan Estate. Approximately 200 acres of the hill is fully deer fenced and planted with native hardwoods. It contains some fairly spectacular topography as well as gentler potential routes. The fact that it is fenced ensures that there will be no conflict with people or farmed animals.



## 5. ACCOMMODATION

Many visitors to the Field and Rural Skills Centre, the Cycle Hub, the Observatory and Planetarium and the Galloway Forest Park will need accommodation. At the moment there is next to none. Provision of accommodation will fulfil a need and will also contribute to the financial viability and sustainability of the vision plan as a whole.

For many visitors, accommodation in carefully designed and comfortable 'pods' or huts will be an attractive option. They can be sited within natural woodland glades which are at the same time in accessible locations. The beauty of this type of accommodation is firstly that they will become part of the overall experience and secondly that one can start with a limited number and develop further to meet demand, so reducing the risk.

One other possibility would be to create a small settlement of the kind of buildings that would have been constructed in medieval Scotland. A drawing of a possible idea is shown on the next page. This would have many benefits.

1. It would sit well within the landscape and compliment the rich archaeology of Craigengillan.
2. It would be a unique destination and experience.
3. Building the settlement can be an exciting part of the planned rural skills training programme, including stone work, thatching, joinery, craftwork, tree nursery, charcoal burning and small scale horticulture and farming.
4. It could be an alternative to siting the nature re-connect, ranger service and rural skills elements at the Field Centre. It would become an ideal place for courses in re-connection with nature, as



*Cottage before repair*



*During restoration*



*Completion*

described elsewhere. The charismatic founder of the 'Big Tree Society' in the Borders has agreed to help with planning a similar enterprise here.







## **6. OUTDOOR ACTIVITY CENTRE**

For the last two summers Active Outdoor Pursuits, a well-respected enterprise based in the Cairngorms but having its roots in East Ayrshire, has carried out a feasibility test run at Craigen Gillan, offering kayaking, gorge walking, canyoning, abseiling, rock climbing and other activities. They hope to grow organically and ultimately to have a permanent operation here.



### **SUSTAINABILITY**

This is essential for all planned projects. Their future must be assured through fully thought out business plans to ensure that they are financially self-supporting within an achievable period. The old requirement that community projects should be `not-for-profit` should be replaced with a requirement that they should be `not-for-loss`. Healthy surpluses can then cover not only good maintenance, but future improvements and developments too.

### **FUTURE STEPS**

1. Identify stakeholders and consult with them.  
Define/re-define the vision accordingly.
2. Once the overall vision is adopted, prepare business and fundraising plans. This will require outside input.
3. Prepare detailed drawings and specifications.
4. Obtain planning consents and building warrants.
5. Confirm job descriptions and advertise them.
6. Obtain construction quotations.
7. Interview job candidates.



## **RELEVANT QUALIFICATIONS AND APPOINTMENTS**

- Honours degree from Aberdeen University in zoology, with botany and soil science as supporting subjects.
- MRICS. 30 year career in land management. Based in Edinburgh and covering the whole of Scotland.
- 18 years hands-on experience here at Craigengillan.
- Trustee - The Scottish Forestry Trust.
- Trustee - The Scottish Civic Trust.
- Trustee - The Scottish Dark Sky Observatory.
- Trustee - The Galloway & Southern Ayrshire UNESCO Biosphere.
- Trustee - The William Dawson Charitable Trust.
- Trustee - The Galloway National Park Association.
- Plus various private family charitable trusts.

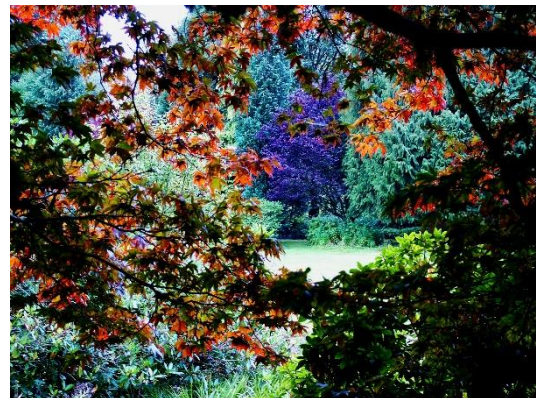
## **DESIGNATIONS, OUR NATURAL ASSETS AND SOME ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE LAST 18 YEARS**

### **Designations**

- The UNESCO Galloway and Southern Ayrshire Biosphere
- The Galloway Forest Dark Sky Park
- Candidate for inclusion within a new proposed National Park
- One of the top 4 Scottish Designed Landscapes as confirmed by Historic Environment Scotland.
- Two important Sites of Special Scientific Interest, with another three adjoining or nearby.
- Over 50 archaeological sites, 2 Scheduled Monuments and many listed buildings.

### **Our Natural Assets**

- 900 acres of woodland, mainly comprising young native hardwoods, together with ancient woodland, amenity trees and some spruce.





- A fascinating history.
- Amazing biodiversity and a remarkable variety of different habitats.
- The neighbouring Galloway Forest Park.
- An accredited organic farming enterprise.
- The wonderful Ness Glen and Dalcairn Falls.
- Our dark skies
- Category A Listed Buildings
- As important as all the above put together, a warm hearted and strong local community with masses of talent, supportive of all that we are doing.



### Achievements Since 2000

Over the last 18 years, with the involvement of the local community, we have:

- Restored all the listed buildings.
- Converted the sheep and Highland cattle enterprise to full organic status.
- Planted 18 miles of hedgerows, which are now being laid in the traditional way.
- Created over 17 miles of footpaths, now enjoyed by over 100,000 people each year.
- Won the Georgian Group Award for 'Best Restoration of an Eighteenth Century British Landscape'.





- Achieved recognition from Historic Environment Scotland for the development and enhancement of the landscape.
- Developed a thriving stable yard with a well-deserved reputation, employing local people and contributing to the rural economy.



- Restored ruined cottages to provide holiday lets, achieving high occupancy levels.
- Hosted events (without charge) for more than 80 organisations including the Royal Scottish Forestry Society, the Architectural History Society, European Organic Farmers, local history groups, horticultural societies, orienteering championships, Army Reserve & Cadets detachments, sponsored walks and runs and many more.
- Welcomed skill seekers and work placements for primary school pupils as young as 9, Doon Academy and older people wishing to learn new skills and get back into the workplace. Inevitably, not every one is a complete success, but those that are can change lives for the better.
- Worked in partnership with SRUC and Ayrshire College. Our happy involvement with Ayrshire College (formerly Kilmarnock College) goes back 16 years. They use the Craigengillan woods to teach practical forest skills and have said that without this cost free arrangement they would not be able to continue. SRUC use the woods here for their chainsaw courses and have just started bringing their students here to see and take part in hedge laying in action and learn this valuable traditional skill. Both colleges have expressed a wish to extend their work with Craigengillan into other rural skills and countryside management. We are putting together a plan.
- Won the 'Scotland's Finest Woods Award' for creation of new native woodlands.



- Together with active participation by four local primary schools, we planted four Jubilee Woods and a Diamond Wood to commemorate the Queen's Diamond Jubilee in 2012. The Diamond Wood is one of the 60 planted across the United Kingdom.
- Installation of a biomass heating system.

- Planted a further 156,000 native hardwoods dedicated to the Woodland Trust's First World War Centenary Woods project to plant 3 million trees across the United Kingdom.
- Country Life/Waitrose Country Person of the Year.
- RSPB Nature of Scotland Innovation Award "Craigengillan. A model for Community Regeneration through Conservation" – Highly commended.
- Silver Lapwing Special Award – "Sharing the Environment with People".
- Constructed Ford Carrick as a base for organised youth groups including all four branches of the Cadets, Scouts, Duke of Edinburgh and John Muir Trust candidates and many more.
- Created the Scottish Dark Sky Observatory, formed into an independent charity. A huge asset with great further potential.





