



WORLD CEILIDH & THE HAIRTH KNOCKENGORROCH, SCOTLAND

Jan Fairley heads to the wild uplands of south-western Scotland to experience two very special festivals

It's around ten o'clock on a Saturday night in May and under a star-filled sky lit by a crescent moon I'm watching a group of people of all ages swinging torches to a percussion band's ricocheting rhythms, moving in and out of each others swirling circles of fire. I'm at a festival called World Ceilidh, held for three days in May, partner to The Hairth, held in the same place for three days in September in a remote valley in Dumfries and Galloway in the Scottish uplands. It may only be an hour or so by car from Glasgow (almost three from Edinburgh across beautiful country) yet even the blurb, *'Hills and dales of the Celtic hinterland'* does not conjure up the gorgeous wildness of what happens at a small farm buried deep in a long forest valley where seemingly out of nowhere these festivals appear. Indeed arriving midday on Saturday rather than for the opening night on Friday, I'd have sworn I was on a wild goose chase had it not been for the homemade posters encouraging me on my way as I drove for several miles along a very empty single-track road with

only sheep as witness. After crossing a few fragile bridges, the car suddenly tipped over into a valley filled with tents like coloured mushrooms, with deep forest on one side and the rushing water of the river Deugh on the other. Greeted by a lot of very happy people, I found I was the last to arrive at this sell-out weekend event that has the feel of an informal family party held in a place that celebrates the complete absence of the commercial trappings of urban life.

The Knockengoroch festivals began when Simon and Liz Holmes got talking to members of the group Old Blind Dogs on a visit to Glasgow's 1997 Celtic Connections Festival. Suddenly they found themselves asking them if they'd come and play in their ancient glen. They'd seen the valley come to life as they'd never imagined it could, with teepees and circle dancing, when they'd agreed to host a 'rainbow gathering' a year earlier. It gave Simon, "the epiphany of his life" as he puts it: after many decades as a smallholder, growing potatoes, keeping Highland cattle, potbellied pigs

and ducks with a bit of a living as an artist on the side, a whole new career arrived just as he and Liz were passing the age of retirement, finding themselves still restless for something meaningful to do. With the aid of the Holmes dynamic daughter Katch (Katriona) and son Robert they threw themselves into learning on-the-job how to run a festival, inviting in more of Scotland's quality musicians like Def Shepherd, Iron Horse and local bands, and somehow were up and running for May 1998. Since then they've gone from an audience of 300 locals to 2,700, including a sprinkling of international visitors. Music happens on the outdoor Bo-Airigh stage for headliners like Transglobal Underground with Natacha Atlas, Baka Beyond, Shooglenifty, Aberfeldy, Rise Kagona and Champion Doug Veitch, plus Son Veneno (in the past they've invited Huun-Huun-Tu, Bellowhead, Eliza Carthy and the Ratcatchers, and many more).

The Shieling, a second indoor stage concentrates on smaller groups: in 2007 this meant attractive Chilean singer-songwriter

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HOW TO GET THERE

- The festival puts on a special 'Knock bus' direct from Edinburgh and Glasgow. It costs £25 return from Edinburgh and £20 from Glasgow. Bus tickets available through the festival website or festival office. Advice on best train stations to travel to and numbers for local taxis can also be found on the festival website.
- For tickets tel: 01644 460 662
- Further information at: www.knockengoroch.org.uk



Opposite page: cosy concerts in the Celtic longhouse. Clockwise from left: a masked statue in the Shieling bar; a decent spot to pitch your tent; Baka Beyond jump around at The Hairth; the longhouse from outside. Below: Tibetan dance

Valentina, and 'Flame and Fury' – the fiery Flamenco-Celtic mix of Sevillean dancer Maria 'Tote' Conte and Scottish fiddler Martin Swan. It also hosted dance workshops and performances of *capoeira*, salsa, Bollywood and flamenco. There were also workshops for instruments such as penny whistle, *bodhrán*, *kora*, guitar, drumming, and a special creative arts tents and a story-telling yurt.

Small, bold, and beautiful Knockengoroch is also often braw with sunshine, although rain and cold nights are to be expected – boots, thermals and woolly hats are still the safest bet for clothing. You can always strip off as I did when dancing to Herbaliser and Altan in September. When my legs got tired of bopping I made my way to Weirdigans organic café for tea and a rum-chocolate energy ball having earlier stoked up on falafels. I then moved sideways to the cosy Langhwan's fireside venue where local musicians on accordions, guitars and flutes gathered round an open wood fire. In May I chilled out in the solar powered 'My Giddy Aunt's Picture House' eating fresh popcorn while watching Tim Burton's crazy film *Beetlejuice*, while in September I watched a polar bear movie surrounded by kids relaxing on mattresses.

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The Shieling had 'Foreign Beggars', featuring beat boxer Shlomo (from Björk's latest album), and a DJ until 3am. Those who wanted to while the night away sitting down headed for the Fraoch Cabaret stage whose open mic produced a mix of comedians, singers and all sorts of wild talent as dawn approached. Still, on the whole, Knockengoroch is very much a family affair with lots of kids and older people bedding down before midnight.

Waking up in the morning to the sound of birds and the running river was really fabulous, as was a breakfast of Stoats Cranachan porridge and delicious fresh coffee (with full breakfasts, crêpes and more on offer). I then slumbered Sunday morning away in the warmth of the Celtic longhouse – with its turf roof, and mud-filled dry stone dyke type walls with open fire – listening to storytellers.

As far as the Holmes family are



concerned, Knockengoroch has found its destiny. As Simon explained, there's been a settlement in the valley since before Roman times. Indeed in Gaelic 'knock' is another way of saying *neuk* which means a gathering place where crofters came to discuss their common work, 'gorroch' has various meanings and indeed 500 years ago the valley was home to the Clan McMillan castle. These days the Holmes clan meet to draw up their annual musical wish list focusing on the Celtic diaspora, UK-based world groups, anyone from abroad touring in the vicinity, and of course Scotland's best (Peatbog Faeries and Capercaillie are the first promised for May 2008). In a hundred years or so Knockengoroch will no doubt be remembered as the 21st century place where people gathered from all over the UK and Europe to camp and dance for three days, twice a year. And with festivities stretching to four days for this year's World Ceilidh 20th anniversary festival, which falls on a bank holiday weekend, there's more reason than ever to head north of the border in 2008. ●

World Ceilidh runs May 22-25 2008
The Hairth runs September 19-21 2008

Competition

We have a pair of four-day tickets to this year's World Ceilidh festival in May to give away. To enter, answer the following question:
In which year did World Ceilidh festival first kick off?
 See p5 for Songlines competition rules and address.
 Closing date March 21 2008

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