

The Isle of Erraid – ‘Source of Happiness’?

What is happiness and where can we find it?

One possibility, it seems, according to ‘The Happiness Formula,’ a major 6-part series broadcast on BBC 2 last summer, is on a tiny, windswept Hebridean island, barely one mile square, lying just off the south-west corner of Mull. The island’s name? Erraid. And despite its size and remote location it’s name has become significant for a number of reasons – not least as a potential destination for finding inner contentment- but also through its long-term connection with members of the famous Stevenson dynasty - both the great Scottish Victorian lighthouse builders and particularly Robert Louis - one of the world’s finest writers of children’s fiction.

Paul Johnson has lived on Erraid for the last eight years - a member of the small island community who have been custodians of the island of Erraid for the last 28 years. Paul, 52, is one of the island’s longest residents and one of the driving forces behind the community. As well as the community’s main mechanic, electrician and plumber and general make-and-mend expert, he also handles the community’s marketing including designing and maintaining the community website. If that wasn’t enough he is very much an active father for his lively 6 year old son, Josh, whilst additionally producing the island’s output of soft cheese, stained glass and soap – the word ‘multi-tasking’ was probably invented for him. In his former career he was the tourism and marketing officer for a local authority in the north-east of England. Mark Easton of the BBC’s Current Affairs Department had travelled as far and wide as Bhutan and the USA in search of the elusive formula for happiness. Interviewing Paul, over a cup of tea in the community dining room, he was probing for the reasons why he had so enthusiastically turned his back on a successful 25 year marketing career to engage with this lifestyle, one which has brought him greater personal happiness, the gregarious Geordie replied, ‘Life is so much richer here, so much more complete.’ Although one would struggle to identify exactly what Paul could add to his list of daily activities to make it more fulfilling. ‘A philosophy of less being more from a man who once tried to convince consumers that more is more’, added Mark in his voice-over, without a trace of irony.

A Dutch family, the Van de Sluis, purchased the former Northern Lighthouse Boards property in 1977, in constant use as a lighthouse- keeper’s community for almost a hundred years until the early 1950’s. A year later they offered it to the Findhorn Foundation, the Moray-based internationally-renowned, spiritual community, to find out if they would be interested in becoming the island’s custodians. The Foundation agreed and shortly afterwards a pioneering band of volunteers arrived on the island, eager to take up the challenge of turning the neglected cottages, gardens and outbuildings into a community, living a simple, largely self-sufficient lifestyle, sharing their homes, work, play and spiritual practice with paying guests.

Over the next thirty years the community physically established itself both on the island as well as in the larger community of the south end of Mull. The community usually averages seven or eight hardy souls – made up of singles, couples and families, staying on average three or four years - attracted to live here, as Paul was, by the lifestyle the community offers; working simply and closely with the land, their menagerie of working animals- cows, hens and sheep – and an ageing Canadian Grey goose, known somewhat imaginatively as ‘Goosy’- the island’s longest resident of over 20 years. The island also has three small boats and two ageing tractors – both important workhorses for fetching and carrying guests and supplies.

The members, who unusually all hail from the UK with the exception of Maren, a young German woman , cheerfully host the few hundred guests who visit annually, generally for a week but often extending their stay –some taking a well-earned sabbatical from busy careers. All of them participate in the community’s gently-paced work–roughly half the week –although the generous tea-breaks and lunch hours the guests enjoy knock a few extra hours of that total- and use their scheduled ‘time off’ to explore the island’s square mile of rugged, unspoilt natural beauty either exploring its gentle hills and heather moorland or sunbathing and swimming at Balfour Bay, the island’s most beautiful and sheltered cove – named after David Balfour, the main character in ‘Kidnapped’- with its stunningly white, sandy beach and often turquoise sea. Mid-week there is always an opportunity for guests to venture ‘off’ island - for a day’s excursion to Iona or Mull. The community and its guests equally enjoy all that the island has to offer throughout the year’s differing seasons - except for four weeks every year when the Dutch family and friends eagerly borrow it back for their summer holidays. Leaving a couple of members to look after animals and tend the burgeoning gardens, the rest of the community, having packed up and vacated their cottages ready for the influx of the Dutch ‘incomers’, go off to visit family and friends.

The community tends to attract a slightly more adventurous and independently-minded type of tourist seeking something different in a holiday – an eco-holiday or a temporary respite from their often city- based jobs and lifestyles with their attendant stresses and strains. But the guests by no means have to be rugged, SAS-trained survivalists to enjoy a holiday here – anyone who is able to step in and out of a boat and are not averse to engaging with the refreshingly natural delights of the community’s outdoor loos (more about those later) are more than physically qualified to stay on the island.

Guests usually arrive in a state of tired but eager anticipation after a breathtakingly beautiful journey –an adventure in itself travelling through some of the most beautiful landscapes Scotland has to offer. They come by train, bus or car, transported through the Highlands by way of the Trossachs or Loch Lomond

to popular tourist town of Oban. After a bracing 45-minute ferry crossing to Craignure, the main ferry port on Mull, they soon find themselves gazing out at the island's wild- mountainous interior before being set down in Fionnphort –the ferry point for Iona. After being transferred to the community's mini-bus they are taken on a short drive east along the single track road from Fionnphort and soon they and their luggage are enjoying a short exhilarating boat-ride across the stretch of a couple of hundred yards of open water – Erraid Sound - whose daily tides turn Erraid into an island separated from the rest of Mull for several hours at a time. First impressions are of a neat, terraced row of cottages, outbuildings and gardens and in the middle distance, atop a hill, the bright white-painted observation tower once used to communicate with the distant lighthouses, all come into sharper relief as the boat gently cruises towards the pier. For a century, from the bulwark of this solid edifice jutting out into the Sound, supply boats first ferried the stone and then the supplies, men and equipment to the lighthouse standing sentinel guard on its wave-lashed reef, fifteen miles away.

The eight solidly-constructed granite cottages, built originally to accommodate the lighthouse-keepers and their families nestle sensibly in the lee of a hill, close to the quarry where the massive lighthouse stones weighing up to 2.5 tons each, were hewn and dressed. They now provide comfortable, cosy homes for the members and their guests alike. In front, the well maintained area of the community's extensive gardens sweep down towards the rocky shore contained by a wind-defying wall, periodically punctuated by metal- gates and solid storage sheds. The wall and the extensive outbuildings –built of the same indigenous pink-flecked grey granite - are of equally inch-perfect construction (you sense that everything built by the Stevensons was designed and built to last for eternity – and possibly beyond!) house a candle-making studio, workshop, a multi-purpose barn and boathouse which also act as an occasional ceilidh and performance space.

In a typical week long stay while sharing the cosy cottages with one or two of the members, the guests participate for roughly half the week in the variety of hands-on activities – most popular is working in the organic gardens where the majority of the community's vegetables are grown, splitting logs for the community's many wood-burning stoves and learning new skills, particularly candle-making - few guests leave the island without proudly packing their own hand-made candle. Particularly enjoyable is assisting the cooks produce the simple soup and salad lunches, the home baking as well as with the preparation of their filling and delicious suppers –as far as possible utilising the extensive range of vegetables, fruits and berries the islands compost and kelp-enriched soil produces.

One of the most enjoyable features of the island is the abundance of home produced food –the vegetables as well as the occasional organic lamb, venison and beef. Erraid isn't a place to bemoan excessive food miles – it's more a matter of food yards as you may well be tucking into a heaped plate of steaming, colourfully assorted vegetables, happily growing in their well-tended plots barely an hour before. There are plenty of opportunities from breakfast to supper to

enjoy the rich, unpasteurised milk from their two hand-milked cows and the various dairy by-products which the members produce daily – yoghurt, cream and different kinds of cheeses. A home made ‘crowdie’ - a delicious soft white cheese is a recent addition to the community’s healthy diet – and along with their locally-acclaimed cakes – made from the island’s fresh eggs and cream - have become popular bartering items with local tradesmen.

Simple though the lifestyle is it is not without its small luxuries – a hot-tub and a sauna –an accommodating gesture to the tastes of the international visitors who have come to relax, as well as work - are fired up from time to time when guest numbers permit. One can only speculate how those hardy, sinewy Victorian stonemasons and labourers might have welcomed the provision of such facilities at the end of an arduous, back-breaking day cutting the islands’ unyielding granite. One thing they would have found remarkably familiar as well as intriguing would be the conversion of the ‘lang drop’ outside toilets which the community used until a few years ago to the more environmentally friendly ‘tree bog’ or compost toilets – still outside and reassuringly close to the backs of the cottages and very much part of Erraid’s down-to-earth philosophy - literally! The community utilise the resulting well-composted ‘waste’ as a rich source of natural organic fertiliser around the young trees in their woodland. Attractive willows are planted around the loos benefiting from the additional moisture their location offers as well as acting as a verdant, living screen.

Inevitably living close to the wilder elements of the West coast – especially the strong, salt-laden winter winds means that maintenance of the solid granite houses and other buildings both inside and out is a high priority – and guest are often found paint brush in hand adding a lick of paint to a door or window frame. The upkeep of the community tractors and small minibus which have to withstand the persistently corrosive effect of the salty air is an ongoing process; living so close to the dramatic Atlantic Ocean is wonderful for romantics but a constant source of routine maintenance and repair for those of a more practical nature!

The tension between the romantic and the practical was never better illustrated than in the internal dynamics of an Edinburgh-based family whose name will be linked forever to great feats of engineering, particularly their lighthouses, and by doing so forged a connection to the island of Erraid which persists to this day. They family was the Stevensons, who for 200 years – and four generations - dominated the world of lighthouse-building, constructing 97 lights between them around Britain’s often treacherous coastline. To the English-speaking world the initials of RLS is immediately recognisable as one of Scotland’s greatest literary sons. Every child knows of Robert Louis Stevenson’s “*Treasure Island*” and of the adventures of David Balfour in his famous story “*Kidnapped*”. What is probably less well known is that he was also the grandson of the most famous and patriarchal figure of that dynasty, Robert Stevenson (1772-1850), the builder of the Bell Rock and numerous other lighthouses around the coasts of Scotland.

Robert Louis was possibly the only member of that famous family who did not become a lighthouse builder!

The lighthouses of Dubh Artak and Skerrivore built some 15 miles and 28 miles respectively from Erraid's shores, were part of Thomas and Allan Stevenson's - Robert's sons - catalogue of enduring constructions. The 120 foot Dubh Artak lighthouse, built by Thomas, R.L.'s father was assembled, section-by-section, from Erraid's quarried granite - over 4,000 tons of it- before being transferred to its final dangerously rocky location on the notorious Torran Rocks. Thirty ships, with a combined loss of fifty lives, had tragically skewered their hulls on those rocks in the seventy years preceding the construction of Dubh Artak, more than justifying the Northern Lighthouse Boards decision to engage the Stevensons to build a lighthouse there.

And while the island hummed and clanged with the noise of hundreds of stonemasons and labourers quarrying and piecing together the giant edifice, the young Robert Louis, Thomas's son came to visit Erraid twice during his formative years, staying up to three weeks each time. These short visits were undoubtedly a major source of inspiration for the young aspiring writer for he alluded to Erraid no less than five times in subsequent short stories and novels. Erraid features most prominently in one of his most popular and enduring novels, 'Kidnapped' whose hero, David Balfour, is shipwrecked on the island's rocky coastline en route to the West Indies and a life of slavery. He endures a wet and miserable twenty-four hours pessimistically contemplating the long-term and unappealing prospect of life as a castaway on the island before embarrassingly having it pointed out to him by some passing fishermen that he can easily walk off this tidal island – a significant piece of artistic licence on R L's part as a short walk to the island's highest point would have quickly established that!

Yet despite the miserable conditions he ascribed to the island in the novel, writing about his brief sojourns on Erraid many years later one can sense in the following passage how much enjoyment he derived from his visits and how much he came to love and appreciate the island's natural history with its enduring stillness and beauty as well as the memory of its ancient visitors.

"But it was in Erraid itself that I delighted chiefly. The lighthouse settlement scarce encroached beyond its fences; over the top of the first brae the ground was all virgin, the world all shut out, the face of things unchanged by any of man's doings. Here was no living presence, save for the limpets on the rocks, for some old gray, rain-beaten ram that I might rouse out of a ferny den betwixt two boulders, or for the haunting and the piping of the gulls. It was older than man; it was found so by incoming Celts and seafaring Norsemen, and Columba's priests. The earthy savour of the bog plants, the rude disorder of the boulders, the inimitable seaside brightness of the air, the brine and the iodine, the lap of the billows among the weedy reefs, the sudden springing up of a great run of dashing surf along the sea-front of the isle, all that I saw and felt my predecessors must

have seen and felt with scarce a difference. I steeped myself in open air and in past ages.

"Delightful would it be to me to be in Uchd Ailiun on the pinnacle of a rock, That I might often see The face of the ocean; That I might hear the song of the wonderful birds, Source of happiness; That I might hear the thunder of the crowding waves Upon the rocks: At times at work without compulsion - This would be delightful; At times plucking dulse from the rocks At times at fishing."So, about the next island of Iona, sang Columba himself twelve hundred years before. And so might I have sung of Erraid.

It is comforting to know how little has changed on the island in the 120 years since he wrote these lines - and how many guests are inspired by similar feelings during their stays on the island, many of them translated into poetry or prose or colourful sketches in the community's journal.

The island is delightfully rich in wildflowers, particularly in the warm late Spring, despite the presence of a flock of hardy sheep on the island who hungrily graze throughout the year across its heather-topped and grassy hummocks. Flag iris, bog myrtle, harebells, bluebells, Grass of Parnassus, wood anemones, and even two rare types of insectivorous plants – Sundew and Butterwort - collectively adorn it - splashes of colour amongst the tufted grasses and dun-brown heathers which carpet the island. Amongst them in sheltered hollows, often in the lee of imposing granite buttresses and canyons, grow hardy clumps of stubby oak, hazel, birch, rowan and aspen trees. And the wildlife, undisturbed by vehicles or the other destructive side effects of human habitation is allowed to flourish unhindered – hares and the occasional red deer wander over its undulating braes, whilst its sheltered coves and stream-fed inlets offer safe habitats to shy otters occasionally seen frolicking at the water's edge. More permanently, a community of around forty Atlantic seals bask contentedly in their private cove on the west side of the island, balancing with gravity-defying ease on their rocky perches. Rarely are they disturbed, except by the occasional throb of a yacht's outboard engine or an over-inquisitive sea-kayaker, enough though to make them flounce, begrudgingly, from their relaxed poses into the security of the turquoise waters below.

Waders of all kinds; herons, oystercatchers, curlews, snipe, redshank and winged plovers all swoop, stalk and spear into the fish-filled, shallow waters of the sandy inlets which for an hour or two each morning and afternoon offer generous feeding opportunities . Whilst above the island, buzzards and ravens are often seen locked in aerial combat, jousting for territorial supremacy – their acrobatic manoeuvres silently observed by majestic sea eagles and the occasional Golden Eagle gazing out from their craggy perches.

From these high island eyries, you struggle to take in the magnificence of the views constantly revealing themselves around you - looking across Erraid Sound, where hungry and inquisitive dolphins, porpoises and basking sharks are regular

visitors, to the Ross of Mull and its scattering of white-washed steadings backed by the broad, brooding presence of The Berg and the usually cloud-topped Ben Mhor rising, grandly behind it. And beyond still, to many of the Inner Hebrides best-known and romantic sounding isles – Tiree, Coll, Colonsay and Rhum through whose waters pods of Orca and Minke whales gently navigate their way towards their Atlantic feeding grounds beyond.

How quickly you also realise that you are surrounded by a cluster of islands of a profoundly inspirational nature, the most famous of which, Iona, lies barely a mile away across the beguilingly beautiful but navigationally treacherous Sound. Iona was the 6th century birthplace of Christianity in these lands from where St Columba and his small band of monks went forth to spread their new spiritual teachings throughout Europe. Always revered as a great spiritual centre by the pre-Christian Celts – it was a home of Druids, a place it is said where the veil between our world and those other unseen worlds is thinnest. Ancient kings of Scotland are buried there – the most infamous, Macbeth, lies finally at peace below its sacred sward. Its ruined Abbey was famously restored during the Depression years, through a radical social experiment and act of faith by unemployed artisans from Glasgow, under the visionary leadership of their Govan minister, the Reverend George Macleod. From a distance, this starkly grey edifice with its distinctively simple, outlines seems to hover, poised between the craggy backdrop of Iona's largest hill and most stunning viewpoint, Dun-I, and the steely-blue turbulent waters of the Sound. The Abbey is clearly visible to the naked eye as you sit and look out from Erraid's simple hillside sanctuary, observing the ferry as it ploughs back and forth across the Sound, carrying its daily cargoes of pilgrims to this holiest of Scottish destinations.

There is an ancient link between the two islands for some of Iona's early monks, possibly seeking fresh vistas to contemplate – both inner and outer, or to find refuge from sporadic Viking raids, are very likely to have temporarily occupied the various shelters and caves which lie scattered throughout Erraid's craggy landscape and coastline.

Many centuries later, a hopelessly seasick Felix Mendelssohn somehow found the inspiration to compose what would eventually become the 'Fingal's Cave' overture after a roller-coaster of a cruise to the tiny, nearby island of Staffa to visit the eponymous Irish giant's legendary home. And in the depressing period of post-war Britain, George Orwell, with only his sister and adopted son for company undertook a year of creative solitude on the beautiful, adjacent isle of Jura. There, below its distinctive and softly-rounded 'paps' clearly visible on all but the cloudiest of days from Erraid, living simply and quietly, twenty five miles from the nearest shop and eight miles from a telephone, he penned his bleak, nightmarish vision of a totalitarian future - the novel '1984'. Will Self, the journalist, author and broadcaster has recently been appointed that island's writer-in-residence.

Erraid continues to draw guests from around the world to this outlying and beautiful of locations, set amid the flotilla of those awe-inspiring islands,

perching precariously on the wave-lashed rim of the Atlantic Ocean. Some to seek temporary solace from their stressful lives, some to experience and learn of a more sustainable and environmentally kinder way of life, increasingly more relevant in these days of global warming and the reduction of one's carbon impact - and some to continue their search for that most elusive of goals - inner contentment. However, everyone who visits the island cannot fail to be 'kidnapped' by the beauty of the island's setting and the peacefulness, simplicity – and fun, all of which are embedded in the daily rhythm of the chores, activities and rituals which are at the heart of this special island's community's life.

Perhaps the last word should belong to Paul, the community's spokesperson for the BBC's 'Happiness Formula', who came with his wife, Debbie, ten years ago seeking a more rewarding, less stressful lifestyle, first as guests for a week before becoming members a year later.

'When I stop for a minute from working on my tractor or digging up some carrots or leeks in the garden and I look around I immediately sense what I love about this place and what has kept me here for so long. It will either be a gorgeous view or a sunset – at any time of the year because of the ever-changing light and weather, or it will be the chatter of guests getting to know each other as they potter about in the gardens –or it could be the smells coming from the kitchen of a delicious meal just about to be served. That is what makes me content – the simple pleasure of it all – community life –everyone sharing and helping out - not without its hard work and challenges by any means – but somehow it keeps everything in a healthy perspective - and I think other people who come here experience that too -it certainly makes me happy'.

David Munro, February 2007

The Happiness Formula – broadcast May – June 2006

Should you wish to learn more about any aspect of this Press Release or to visit the island please contact Paul Johnson, Isle of Erraid Community.

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