



The Old Mill / An t-Seann Mhuileann

The Old Mill and the neighbouring Millbrae Cottage at Buessan were acquired by the Ross of Mull Historical Centre in 2001. Millbrae Cottage was opened in 2009 as a small museum, an office and an archive storage space and has been open to the public since then. The Old Mill is a ruinous shell and has become increasingly fragile over the last 20 years. It is now at a stage where it needs consolidation work to ensure it is safe enough for activities in and around Millbrae Cottage to continue.



Above: the roofless Buessan Mill with Tigh na Rois, the Ross of Mull Heritage Centre in Millbrae Cottage on the left

While the urgent repair works are essential, The Ross of Mull Historical Centre would like to go further and repair the building fully with a new use so it can be at the heart of the community once again.

Community Consultation

As a first stage, the Centre is carrying out a Community Consultation to gauge whether there is community support for the venture and would like to hear from as many people as possible who have a connection to the area. The survey can be accessed through this link <https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSdD9-hAllo6LbU23PnUpWL7l4kEk6yF-1r1pdsAWUdOqZJo7g/viewform>

If you know someone who would be interested in filling in the survey but does not have online access, please let them know that they can obtain paper copies of the survey from the Ross of Mull Historical Centre Tel 01681 700659 or by calling into the centre during opening hours.

In addition to the survey, there will be a drop-in session for the community to find out more about the proposed project. Please keep an eye out for further details of the time and date.

There is more information below about the old mill and this may help give you some ideas before filling in the survey.

Please be aware that while visitors can see the outside of the mill building when visiting the Centre, it is not safe to enter the ruined mill itself.

Brief History of the Mill

The walls that can be seen today are the remains of a T-plan two-storey water mill that was last in operation before the First World War. Prior to this date, grain, that is oats, barley and corn, had been ground on this site for hundreds of years.

There is evidence of an earlier 18th century single-storey mill on the same site. Records show the mill building was altered in 1830 when improvements were being made to the general estate management of the wider Argyll Estate on Mull. In its current form, the building comprises space for grinding machinery at the front and a drain-drying kiln at the rear.



Above: the old mill in November 2023, the water-wheel sat against the right hand gable

The power was provided via a mill lade, that diverted water from the burn, giving a 20 foot head of water to power the over-shot water-wheel. Traces of the lade can still be seen running alongside the road above the mill to Linne a Dhuais. Unfortunately the line of the lade was blocked by the construction of the new road and it is not currently thought to be feasible to reinstate the supply.

During the nineteenth century the 11 foot diameter wheel was replaced with a larger one of 14 foot diameter and grooves from both can still be seen in the end wall of the mill. The wheel shaft passed through the end wall of the building and connected to a series of cog wheels that turned the large mill stones. Although no longer intact, some of the millstones and machinery can still be seen in and around the building.

A little is known about the millers who ran the mill. Donald McIntyre was the miller at Bunessan in 1744. By 1779, the Argyll Census records that Duncan Graham, his son Donald and his 84 year old father were living at the mill. Up until the mid-19th century there were at least six sizeable water mills on Mull. By 1892 there were only two, one of which was Bunessan, which was operated by Neil McPherson and his family. After milling ceased, they continued to use the building as a joinery workshop.





Above: views of the old mill in November 2023

The Old Corn Mill, Bunessan was listed Category C by Historic Environment Scotland in 1991. Category C listing indicates it is a building of special architectural or historic interest which is a representative example of a period, style or building type. <https://portal.historicenvironment.scot/designation/LB12948>

Bunessan Mill is also on the Buildings at Risk Register for Scotland. The Buildings at Risk Register has been in operation in Scotland since 1990 in response to a concern at the growing number of listed buildings and buildings in Conservation Areas that were vacant and had fallen into a state of disrepair. The Register is maintained by Historic Environment Scotland, and provides information on properties of architectural or historic merit throughout the country that are considered to be at risk. The entry for Bunessan Mill can be viewed here https://buildingsatrisk.org.uk/search/keyword/bunessan/event_id/894325/building_name/bunessan-mill-bunessan

In 2001, the Ross of Mull Historical Centre acquired the Old Mill and the adjacent Cottage which has now been converted as the permanent home of the Centre. The Mill is still a shell and now in a fragile condition. The Ross of Mull Historical Centre are currently exploring ways to ensure that the mill's importance as an historical asset is safeguarded for the future.

Previous repair schemes

A repair scheme was drawn up in 1991 by J S Fiddimore for the previous owner. The scheme did not proceed, but the drawing gives an impression of what the repaired building could look like from the outside.

Above: Floor plans of Buinessan Mill as proposed in 2002 © RoMHC courtesy of Shauna Cameron

In 2023, the Ross of Mull Historical Centre commissioned a structural survey of the mill from Krystyna Pytasz of Addison Conservation and Design. She found that overall, the ruined building is in good condition and suitable for reuse in the future. However, she identified some structural repairs which do need to be addressed urgently (within 2 years), in particular to timber safe lintels and some areas of masonry stabilisation, and further work within 5 years.

In more detail, her recommendations are divided into two Phases;-

Phase 1 URGENT – to be carried out as soon as possible but not later than within two years – the replacement of timber lintels; localised masonry stabilisations Building (B), pointing of internal faces of Building (A), securing loose stones at wallheads; vegetation control

Phase 2 ESSENTIAL – to be carried out within five years - repointing of masonry generally; vegetation control. It should be noted that if the Essential works are not carried out within the given period, the masonry might become affected, resulting in cracking and bulging.

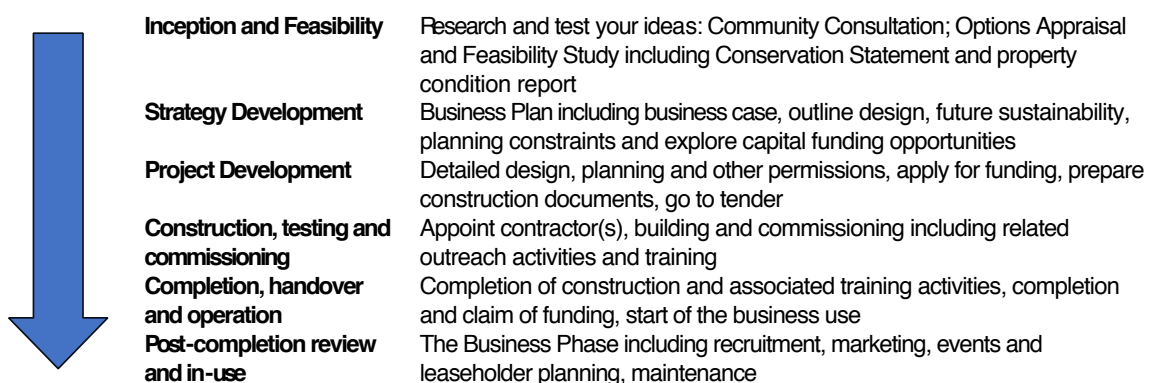
NB Building B is the main south facing block, Building A is the leg of the T, or kiln block, to the rear.

The total cost of the two phases is estimated to be in the region of £130,000 including VAT and fees, but there may be savings if the works are carried out in one contract. If these works are completed, it should be sufficient to mothball the building for at least the next 50 years. If the building is to be brought back into use, these works would also be required.

What next for 2024 and beyond?

The Ross of Mull Historical Centre (RoMHC) is a Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisation (SCIO) whose purposes are to promote the advancement of heritage, science and education by the study, display and promotion of the cultural history and natural environment of the operating area. As owners of Buinessan Mill, they have a responsibility to stop the mill, as an historic asset, deteriorating, but also realise that the fragile masonry may restrict safe access to Millbrae Cottage and limit current outreach activities. In addition, the RoMHC realise that this could also be an opportunity to carry out full repairs so the mill would become a fully functioning building again that could be of benefit to both themselves and the community.

There are many stages to develop a project like this and these are outlined below.



The purpose of the first step, Community Consultation, is to gauge the community's support for the project and to establish if there is a demand for various different uses for the building. Current ideas for the building include workshops, office/training type space, a Gaelic Centre, a retail outlet for local produce, a café/bakery, or a combination of the above. Restoration as a working mill is not considered feasible owing to the road having cut through the mill lade. However, additional uses may be proposed by the community during the consultation which will also be looked at.

The community consultation is being carried out principally through online surveys in June – July 2024. RoMHC will support residents who do not have online access to complete the surveys on paper at the Centre in Bunessan. The RoMHC have engaged Sara Carruthers, who specialises in community led heritage projects, to assist them with the community consultation. The RoMHC would like to hear from as many people as possible who have a connection to the Ross of Mull and Iona, including private individuals and businesses. To gather as many views as possible, a drop-in event will take place in late June (date to follow).

The results of the surveys and event will be collated and presented in the form of a digital report. This report will evidence the level of community support and demand and also support future funding and planning applications if the project proceeds.

If the Community Consultation establishes that there is support and demand for some options for new uses for the mill and RoMHC wishes to proceed, the next stage to develop the project would be to test the feasibility of a selection of these ideas through an Options Appraisal and Feasibility Study. The RoMHC would then be in a position to make an informed choice on a future sustainable use for the mill which could be worked up into a full Business Plan.