



Dundonald Castle Visitor Centre

Local heritage in community hands
South Ayrshire

Background

Once home to the grandson of Robert the Bruce, Dundonald Castle has seen many a visitor come and go since the first stone was laid in the 1300s. A fortified ruin affording picturesque views from the top of a volcanic plug, the Castle is more popular now than ever, attracting international tourists and locals alike.

Which is why The Friends of Dundonald Castle SCIO had a nice, but challenging, problem to solve – too many people, too little space. Opened by a group of enthusiastic volunteers in 1998 and now run by a team of paid staff and volunteers, the Visitor Centre hosts events and activities throughout the year. From local schools benefitting from the Friend's education programme to the weekly knitting group, performances and film screenings, the Centre is a thriving hub.

But with visitor numbers growing from 9,000 to 25,000 in recent years, it was starting to burst at the seams – and even the knitters couldn't solve that problem.

“

“We discovered nobody was going to give us money to make those changes unless we owned the building.”

Phil Galbraith

“At times we'd have 30 primary school children dressed as knights about to head up for a tour of the castle, twelve ladies knitting plus other visitors,” says Project Coordinator, Phil Galbraith. “It just wasn't big enough. But the question was, did we extend the Centre, build an annexe or do an entirely new build?”

Preparing for transfer

Although Historic Environment Scotland is legally responsible for the Castle, providing maintenance and conservation, the Visitor Centre belonged to South Ayrshire Council. The Friends rented the property for £1 a year, but if their desire for more space was to go ahead, that would have to change.

“We discovered nobody was going to give us money to make those changes unless we owned the building,” explains Phil. “Our aim was to buy the Visitor Centre and small piece of adjacent land, so we could build a new Centre and keep operating the old one until it was ready – then turn the old site into an extension of the car park.”

The Friends paid for a feasibility study from a local architect who knew the site well, before moving ahead with the asset transfer. The Visitor Centre and land was valued at £32,000, with the Friends receiving a discount of roughly £3,000, which they covered with a grant from the Scottish Land Fund.

Working with the council

Phil describes himself and the rest of the staff and volunteers who worked on the project as “innocents abroad” – but they weren’t the only ones.

“South Ayrshire Council had never done a community asset transfer when we initially approached them, so it was a learning process for them as well as us,” says General Manager, Dr Kirsteen Croll. “From the first discussion to when we actually secured ownership of the building, it took four years.

“Partly because when we first started working on it, the Council hadn’t yet created its own asset transfer documentation. So we had to pull information off the Scottish Government website and ask Development Trust Association Scotland for documents. It was a very long process.”



When South Ayrshire Council eventually appointed an officer to work directly with the Friends, things began to run more smoothly but there were still lengthy delays. “The officer was superb,” says Phil. “But part of the problem is the Council is structured in a silo fashion. So when their legal team got involved it wasn’t simply a case of our officer walking over to them and saying ‘here’s where we are’, it went all the way up to the top of the development team, across the way and back down.”

That said, the Friends were grateful for the knowledge and support South Ayrshire Council had to offer. “They helped us with our constitution and a member of their planning team looked at our proposals,” says Phil. “They also informed us that the easiest way to lodge the land ownership in Edinburgh – so we didn’t have to pay too much in fees – was just a matter of moving boundaries a little bit.”

Overcoming challenges

Looking back on the process, Phil describes the huge amount of information gathering required as one of the most difficult aspects. That, and identifying what needs to be done, when and by whom.



“We found our way through it all – it was a case of finding out who to go to, and what to ask for.”

Phil Galbraith

“I never envisaged having to get a District Valuer from Glasgow down to see us, or getting the land checked by a company specialising in outdoor surveying,” he says. “They discovered the site was an old rubbish dump from pre-war days, so test boreholes had to go in. That had to be put out to tender but how do you do that? We found our way through it all – it was a case of finding out who to go to, and what to ask for.”

To that end, the Friends drew on various sources of support. Alongside the Council, Phil cites the Community Ownership Support Service as a key organisation.

“COSS was excellent,” he says. “They came to visit, talked to us, checked out the forms, pointed us in the direction of where to go next and gave us legal advice. They guarded our back.”

“Historic Environment Scotland was also very supportive in terms of information sharing and guidance,” adds Kirsteen. “They’re our key stakeholders so their consent team came out to discuss our plans to make sure it fits with their vision.

“They’re keen to help us because they know not many other historical sites are doing what we are in terms of engagement and community ownership of a heritage asset. It’s certainly a model they would like to take forward to their other Properties in Care.

Security for the community

Now that the property is finally in their hands, a huge sigh of relief has reverberated around the Dundonald community.

“It’s given everyone a sense of security,” says Kirsteen. “There was a real fear amongst people that councils across the board were stripping assets and selling them off. This is their happy place – they go into the castle, take part in activities, engage with their heritage, and they wanted to know that was secure.

“When we told them the transfer had been successful, the outpouring was just wonderful. They were saying ‘we’ve got our Visitor Centre’ – not ‘you’ve got’. Everybody was so happy.”



“This is their happy place – they go into the castle, take part in activities, engage with their heritage, and they wanted to know that was secure.”

Kirsteen Croll

Dundonald Castle Visitor Centre

www.dundonaldcastle.org.uk

Acknowledgements

Main Photograph provided by By DougRM, other photographs provided by Dundonald Castle Visitor Centre. Copywriting by Kelly Apter. With thanks to Phil Galbraith, Kirsteen Croll and everyone at Dundonald Castle Visitor Centre for sharing their story.