

Report on the GalGael-Iona Community Work Weeks

November 2024 & March 2025

This report is to our funder, The John Wigham (Enjoyment) Trust, to a prospective funder, and to both the GalGael Trust and the Iona Community. It has the approval of the participants.



Top, Maureen and Lynn (at each end of the banner) during the Iona Abbey Work Week in November 2024, and bottom Lynn, Paul, Frank and Vic in March 2025

Historical Background to Work Week

History matters to the [GalGael Trust](#). Stories tell us about our past, vision tells us about our future, and one grows out of the other. So it is, that there has long been a connection between Glasgow's onetime shipbuilding district of Govan where GalGael is based, and the [Iona Community](#). Back in the Great Depression of the 1930s George MacLeod, the minister of Govan Old Parish Church, led groups of unemployed shipyard workers to rebuild Iona Abbey. George would later become the first Ecology Party member of the House of Lords (now the Green Party), and he famously led the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland eventually to condemn nuclear weapons as "ungodly".

In a wee book, *We Shall Re-Build*, that he wrote in 1944 (p. 5), he said that the main work of the Iona Community should be "in the difficult places". By that, he meant especially the places in cities where poverty and despair bite the hardest and oppress the human spirit. However, "a very short period on the Island", which is to say, the Isle of Iona, can help "to set our compass" (p. 5). The experience of people, nature and God together makes *community*, that nourishes and sustains our work and lives.

Later in the book he describes how he was wandering sadly through the decayed Abbey ruins in the summer of 1938 when, "To meet his despondency, round the most shattered gable came a stranger carrying his pack, and asking if he might have a night's rest in our congested first hut of residence" (p. 119-120). The stranger turned out to be a foreman stone mason. With his help, the next summer saw ten more such craftsmen turn up. George realised that, as the Second World War came to an end, the work on Iona "will require carpenters and plasterers, slaters and plumbers". This would help to restore Iona Abbey as "perhaps the third most famous Christian shrine in the world." (*And who would we be to question such a claim! – Ed.*) For hundreds of years, he pointed out, Iona had lain at a "juncture between the spiritual and material". It had been "a place of healing" where "many hearts have been uplifted". Perhaps, he concluded, "If our generation can complete the building", our children can "make of it a place of healing again". That healing and vision defines our calling today.

Down the years, the once-strong link between Iona and Govan has weakened. However, recent years have seen it starting to rebuild. Thoughtful individuals and a small Quaker fund, the John Wigham (Enjoyment) Trust (set up to share "enjoyment" with people of minimal resources) has led the author of this report to take GalGael groups to Iona Hostel seven times since 2016. A full set of reports is linked on the final slide of a photo-sharing [at this link](#). But two factors have now changed. First, the hostel is no longer a hostel, and John MacLean who gave us such generous rates is retiring. Second, David Lees of the GalGael has established a strong relationship with Ruth Harvey, the leader of the Iona Community, and they visualised working with the Abbey. Ruth had spent part of her childhood at Ibrox Terrace behind the GalGael premises. Her father, John Harvey, then led the Iona Community, while her mother, Molly, was constantly engaged with grassroots poverty networks in Glasgow.

This background led to the Iona Community's warden at the Abbey, Caro Penney, offering the GalGael two fully subsidised places on the end-of-year Work Week in November 2024. A pair of our most experienced volunteers offered to go, Maureen Gilmour and Lynn McCambridge. Such was the success that we were invited to send up four more for the start-of-year Work Week this past March. Assistance from the Iona Community's bursary fund covered half of their accommodation costs, and Work Week is already being offered at half the normal rate. Thanks to this and the John Wigham (Enjoyment) Trust, Lynn was again able to, this time taking the GalGael's Vic Brown, Paul Hamilton and Frank Mathieson. This report tells of their time, the Abbey staff responses, and our future hopes.

What it Meant for our Volunteers and the Iona Staff

From Lynn

“Thank You Kindly for letting Maureen and I Share The Beautiful Experience of Iona Once Again. We had The Most Amazing Time on Our Work Week Volunteering, Maureen and I met So Many Beautiful, Amazing People from all over The World and We have Now made A WhatsApp Group to Keep In Touch.

“Everything About Iona is Just So Perfect and Soothing and Maureen and I can't Thank You Enough for Letting Us Both Share this Amazing Experience Trip Once Again and Hopefully We will have The Honour of Visiting this Special Little Island in The Near Future 🙏”

(Pictured with one of the signs made for the Abbey in the GalGael workshop)



From Maureen (pictured seated):

My time spent on Iona for work week was like no other. The staff made me feel so welcome. I was given various tasks to complete, some woodwork, cleaning, sewing, and helping in the kitchen. Each work team made me feel valued, and I found the work enjoyable giving me a great sense of accomplishment. I attended each religious service, all slightly different in their approach, but each gave meaning and understanding. I was able to share one of my written pieces at their Ceilidh, which I had never done before. The support and understanding I was given helped me tremendously. To have such a shared experience of mental health issues was invaluable. The food was fresh and nourishing, which helped me thru each day. I cannot express how much my time spent there helped soothe my soul. I would encourage everyone to uptake the offer of a week spent with the wonderful team on Iona for work week. I feel I have made great friends during my stay and hope to return again soon.



From Paul:

“Iona is a special place with a very strong energy about the place that does resonate with everyone that goes there. For myself it touched me deeply and has started a journey which I am keen to see where it leads, and I will be going back very soon.”



From Frank:

“I went to Iona on a working week to represent the GalGael. Well, I had great company, met new friends, food was amazing, the scenery and the feeling in the church were outstanding and I had the experience of my [life] and pray I go back one day.

THANK YOU 🙏”



The Walks:

This was Us On Our Way to Columba Bay and We got Lost and Ended up at Pigeon Cave which was Pretty Cool as We found a wee Cave and The Rock I was Sitting on had A Lovely Wee Bundle of Different Coloured Blue Stones which Haven't been touched and Clearly put there for A Reason it was Lovely

😊 We Came Across Some Boggy Bits and Our Our Way Back Yes I Fell in up to My Waist which was Pretty Funny as its All Part of The Adventure 😊❤️

Vic (above), Lyn and Frank (below), words by Lyn.

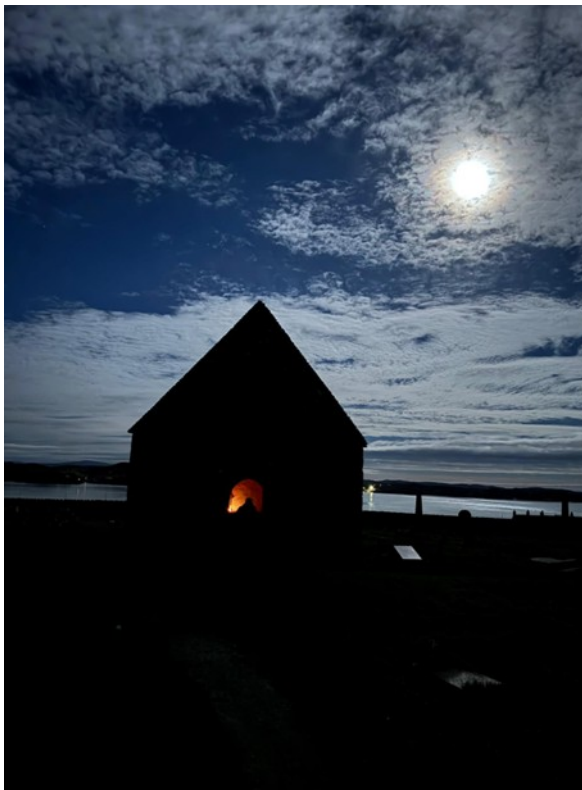


Evidence of "work" done:

Me, from Glasgow. "These pictures are amazing. But I thought you'd all gone there to work!"

The Reply. "We Did, this Was Our Half Day Thursday 😊"

Me. "Half a barrow load of seaweed for a whole week's work!"



From St Oran's Chapel: "Good Morning Alastair, I think this is a Fantastic Photo as The Window doesn't look like this if that Makes Sense. Was Weird as The Window isn't Far Away like that, but I thought You'd Like this One." [The window is near, but in the photo it steps back into infinity].

A letter from Lyn (pictured right) who first went to Iona on the GalGael trip to the Green Shed in March 2024, then to work week in November and then again, serving as the link person, with the other 3 GalGael volunteers in March 2025. Below is a shortened transcript of the full hand-written letter.



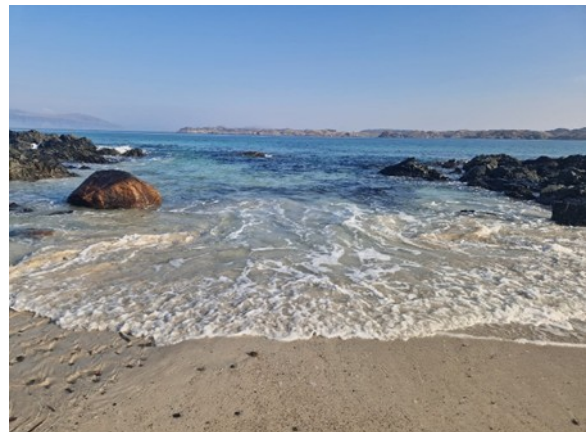
(Paul, Vic and Frank pictured below)

“This is my wee note of my yet again beautiful experience on the beautiful, beautiful island of Iona. Yet another inspiring, calming, lovely 6 days spent in the beautiful Abbey. Yet again I met the most amazing people from different countries, which was beautiful and for me it was breathtaking (in a lovely way)....

“Every member of staff in the Abbey made me feel very, very welcome. The food was beautiful morning, noon and night. The Abbey services in the morning and night were beautiful and for some reason they gave me a different outlook on life (if that makes sense).

“I had an amazing work week with Vic, Paul and Fank and I feel truly blessed and privileged.... As the saying says on the wall: once you have visited Iona for the first time, you are guaranteed to be back three times, and I cannot thank you [all at] my Wee Happy Place [the GalGael] and the beautiful people on Iona for letting me experince this once again....

“Iona has certainly opened my eyes, as the world isn’t full of bad people and Iona has given me the strength that I thought I would never have due to my past.”



These are unsolicited messages from Iona Community Staff at the Abbey:

Hanna: “It's been fantastic having Lynn, Paul, Frank and Vic here. They've been such a joy and I'm so glad that we got to benefit from their wisdom and energy.”

Chris: “Thank you so much for all you did in facilitating the visit by GalGael folks to Iona for our Work Week. They contributed so much to the staff and guests and hopefully changed all they encountered. I would be grateful if you could pass on this note and photo to Vic, Lynne, Paul and Frank.”

Dot: “Just wanted to send you a quick message to say thank you for all you did to enable Lyn, Vic, Paul and Frank to come and join us for Work Week. We have had a fantastic week! I don't know if you spotted in the CCN Zoom last night, after Kathy said “it might change *their* lives”. I put into the chat that it might change *our* lives too. That message came across quite strongly this morning as staff and volunteers were sharing about Work Week – we gain a huge amount from our guests, and the presence of those 4 was particularly valued by many this week. To be continued ...!”

Caro: “Just to back-up what Dot has said - it really has been a wonderful week, and a real gift for us all ... thank you.”

Andy: “There are no words really that could convey the impact these four diamonds had on the week. [They] gave their hearts and souls to it and I think they got a lot from it. I will let them tell you their experiences. Just one thing hit me deeply was this ... I was chatting to them round the dinner table one evening and mentioned that there is a plan to get 4 folk to come up from GalGael again for next work week later in Oct or Nov. They all said they would love to, but said it may be fair to give someone else a shot from GalGael. There lies a true community.”



Thanks to Funders, and Future Plans

Travel disruption with both the train and the ferry required a change of plans. As the John Wigham trust is for “enjoyment” it had been intended for them to travel by train, however, it ended up by bus and two had bus passes. Some of the saving was offset by increasing the allowance for food while travelling as a ferry cancellation meant a long wait in Oban. The result is that our spending came in a little over £100 under budget. I request that we might be permitted to apply this to the costs of travel for Maureen and Lynn on the November 2024 trip, and anything left over, to roll over to the forthcoming Winter 2025 one if that would be acceptable? I am seeking to match the Wigham’s £1,500 with an application to another trust for that next occasion, as the Abbey have signified a willingness to have folks back, and there is lots of interest in our Govan workshop here.

A big thank you, then, to the John Wigham (Enjoyment) Trust’s trustees, to the Iona Community who supported both the 2024 and 2025 weeks with their bursary fund, and to GalGael colleagues especially Dorothy Graham and David Lees who sorted out practicalities at our end.

*Alastair McIntosh,
GalGael Trustee, 11 April 2025*

