

Turf times... Appeal for historic building material to recreate 17th century style 'Creel' house in Glencoe

Conservation charity, the National Trust for Scotland has launched one of its more unusual 'appeals' as it seeks landowners to donate turf to help reconstruct a traditional turf-walled 'creel' house in Glencoe.

Creel houses are largely lost from Scotland's architectural landscape, but they were a building style that would have dominated the West Highland's rural communities until the 19th century.

Archaeological excavations in the heart of Glencoe have shown that creel houses were once dotted throughout the glen in small townships and the Trust plans to recreate one particular building that would have been lived in during the 17th century and at the time of the infamous Massacre of 1692.

Creel houses combined a sturdy 'cruck' frame of timber, with basket-like 'wattle' internal walls weaved from freshly cut 'green' wood and were lined on the outside with thick, insulating walls built from blocks of turf. The roof would have been lined with thinner turf below thatch, likely made of heather.

Materials for the 13 x 4m replica creel house, which will be located outside Glencoe Visitor Centre, are being sourced from within the glen and from other National Trust for Scotland estates, but the project team is still seeking another 60m² (approx. 8m x 8m area) source of turf to complete the building's 1m thick turf walls.

Mark Thacker, a craftsman on the project team who specialises in earth-building, explains, "The task is not quite as simple as heading down to a local garden centre to pick up some turf lawn rolls – it needs to be cut up to 20cm deep and preferably come from an 'unimproved' grassland with a stone-free soil. **Explain what unimproved means.**"

It is hoped that the turf can be sourced relatively locally, so the team can harvest and transport it to its destination without clocking up too many 'turf miles', but they will welcome offers from anywhere in Scotland as part of their search.

While large gardens or pasture fields may be able to donate a patch of turf – the plea also goes out to homebuilders and developers who are planning to clear a plot for construction. The turf needs to be harvested in summer 2021 when the Glencoe creel house building work will be well underway, as it can dry out quickly after being lifted.

Once a common material in vernacular Scottish construction, the use of turf died out in the 19th century and the project is a great opportunity to re-learn lost skills as well as helping give visitors a glimpse of the kind of buildings the MacDonalds of Glencoe once lived in.

Derek Alexander, the National Trust for Scotland's Head of Archaeology says "We were disappointed to have to pause our turf house project this year as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, but are excited to be bringing our team of experienced craftspeople back together for 2021 when we hope visitors from across the globe will be able to watch history take shape."

If you think you may be able to offer all or part of the turf required, please contact Glencoe National Nature Reserve on 01855 811307 or email glencoe@nts.org.uk.

Find out more about the Glencoe Turf House project at:

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