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## **CANNA HOUSE REOPENS WITH GAELIC SCHOLARS' POST-WAR ATMOSPHERE PRESERVED**

The National Trust for Scotland is welcoming its first visitors following the completion of a nine-year programme of repair and restoration to Canna House, the former home of dedicated Gaelic scholars John Lorne Campbell and Margaret Fay Shaw.

The conservation charity says it has aimed to create an atmosphere which will give visitors a sense that 'someone has just left the room,' with a warm, lived-in feel throughout the house. Gaelic song and language will fill the air, as audio devices are triggered when visitors move through each room. The couple's extensive collection of personal items acquired over a lifetime are displayed throughout in an organic and eclectic way, showcasing how the house would have looked in the mid-20th Century, not long after World War II.

Extensive repairs have been made to the building, roof and windows of the house to withstand the Hebridean weather and protect its important and historic contents, which include an internationally significant archive collection of Gaelic music, folklore and culture.

Open for pre-booked guided tours from Saturday 19 April, Operations Manager Angus Murray, said: "We've worked hard to create an atmosphere that reflects Canna House in its prime — a home full of music, stories, and Gaelic, just as John and Margaret would have had it. As a team, we are excited to share this experience with a new generation of visitors to Canna."

Among the highlights of the collection are a Dictaphone recording machine, which John used to capture Gaelic speakers in the Western Isles and Cape Breton; Margaret's favourite Graflex camera used to record a disappearing way of life; and the Book of Pooni, dedicated to their favourite cat.

Work has been underway since 2016 at Canna House with a series of emergency repairs, but it was in 2022 that the project really gathered pace as a priority project in the National Trust for Scotland's 10-year strategy, ***Nature, Beauty & Heritage for Everyone***. The project was incredibly complex, with:

- more than 1,650 objects cleaned and conserved
- 160 items of furniture conserved
- 140 framed works cleaned and conserved
- more than 50 fixtures and fittings cleaned

- historic wallpapers and original painted surfaces cleaned in 10 rooms, with other lost original wallpapers recreated
- extensive external fabric conservation repair, focusing on future climate resilience
- structural repairs completed to the original building and further structural enhancement to accommodate new archive facilities
- updated services and improved insulation for better energy efficiency and installed conservation heating system to protect collections.
- creation of two dedicated archive storage rooms and a reading room within the house

Philip Long OBE, Chief Executive at the National Trust for Scotland, said: "All of us who have a love for Canna and an appreciation of the important stories this house holds will be delighted to see the incredible condition Canna House is now in. Caring for these places is not an easy task, but it is an important one and our charity is privileged to play a part alongside the creative residents, skilled contractors and many others who make projects like this possible. I hope everyone, whether they live here, visit often, or after reading this, come for the first time, enjoy the nature, beauty and heritage of this special place."

Canna House was the home of John Lorne Campbell and Margaret Fay Shaw who amassed an extraordinary collection of Gaelic music, folklore and culture including some 1,500 Gaelic folksongs and 350 folk tales; the first recordings of members of the Mi'kmaq nation; and over 5,000 photographic negatives and 25 reels of film spanning 50 years of Gaelic culture on the islands of Canna, Barra, the Uists and Mingulay. And, of course, the copious paper archives of these noted Gaelic scholars.

This material is now held in conservation-standard storage rooms in the house. The new reading room provides, for the first time, the space needed for an archivist to complete a planned audit of the contents, and this will be followed by a two-year cataloguing project to create a detailed listing of the contents. When complete, the catalogue will provide improved access to archive information, both for staff answering enquiries, and researchers who wish to visit Canna House. When the house opens this year, the Trust will be able to provide limited research access, by appointment. For full exploration of what the archive has to offer, most researchers will want to await the completion of the new catalogue.

Clea Warner, National Trust for Scotland Regional Director for the Highlands and Islands said: "The house opening is just one of the many fantastic events taking place on Canna in 2025. In April, the team took part in the Trust's Easter Egg Trails for the first time, and there's some pioneering seabird conservation work underway too. The National Trust for Scotland is delighted to have been able to support the community's

brilliant visitor hub project, and work with them on a wide range of other plans to contribute to the community and Canna.

"We are very grateful for the support of many who have enabled so much of this work to take place. Thank you to NTS Foundation USA who have supported a range of projects on Canna, including \$600,000 towards the house project. For the Canna Visitor Hub, there has been support from VisitScotland and the Highland Council through the Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund, which was secured by the community and has been vital. Gifts in honour of our late Vice President, Simon Fraser, have also been received from donors in the UK and USA to improve wayfinding and support our seabird monitoring. Our charity appreciates every contribution which helps us to care for this special place."

Geraldine MacKinnon, speaking on behalf of the Isle of Canna Community Development Trust, said: "The Isle of Canna Community Development Trust is pleased that Canna House has now re-opened, enabling the public to access Canna House through guided tours, and share the wealth of Gaelic culture it holds, along with the local historical and environmental heritage of Canna."

The Canna community is working on a range of regeneration projects including new affordable housing, business space and tourism initiatives, all aimed at boosting Canna's resident population to a more stable and sustainable level for the 21st century.

The Isle of Canna is hosting a range of events and activities throughout 2025, which began with the Easter Egg Trail at Canna House and lambing weekend in April. Since May, guided puffin walks have been running, guided corncrake walks are scheduled throughout the summer, and Canna Naturefest is taking place in July, which will include various nature walks and activities. For more information and to book tickets, see the full listing of events at [www.nts.org.uk/canna](http://www.nts.org.uk/canna).

Canna House is open for pre-booked guided tours, book at [www.nts.org.uk/canna](http://www.nts.org.uk/canna).

**ENDS**

**Notes to editors**

**Images:** <https://www.flickr.com/gp/133918740@N04/z09j7bmp93>

**About John Lorne Campbell**

John Lorne Campbell (1906 – 1996) was a distinguished Scottish Gaelic scholar, renowned for his dedication to preserving Gaelic culture and heritage. Educated at St

John's College, Oxford, he studied both Rural Economy and Celtic, the latter under a Professor John Fraser who became Campbell's mentor and nurtured his passion for Gaelic.

Campbell's career took a defining turn when he travelled to Barra in 1933 to study crofting life and colloquial Gaelic. Immersing himself within the Hebridean community, he collaborated with notable locals such as Neil Sinclair and Annie and Calum Johnston, becoming a pioneer in the collection and preservation of Gaelic songs, stories, and oral traditions.

In 1938, Campbell purchased the Isle of Canna and neighbouring Sanday, embracing the role of laird and farmer. Alongside his wife, Margaret Fay Shaw, an accomplished photographer and folklorist, they created an extensive archive of Gaelic songs, stories, and linguistic material.

In 1981, Campbell generously gifted Canna to the National Trust for Scotland (supported with an endowment from the National Heritage Memorial Fund), along with his and his wife's vast library, archives, and sound recordings, ensuring the preservation of their life's work for future generations. Their legacy on Canna endures as a testament to their devotion to Gaelic heritage.

### **About Margaret Fay Shaw**

Margaret Fay Shaw (1903 – 2004) created an extensive photographic archive of over 1000 prints and 5000 negatives, capturing life in the Hebrides throughout the 20th century. Her journey began when she left her privileged upbringing in Pittsburgh and New York to explore Scotland's west coast, drawn by a passion for Gaelic music. Inspired as a teenager upon hearing the Gaelic songs of Scottish singer Marjory Kennedy Fraser, Margaret was determined to experience this traditional music in its original form.

In 1929, she moved to South Uist, living with the Campbell family before seeking more opportunities to delve deeper into Gaelic culture. A pivotal moment came when she heard sisters Màiri and Pèigi MacRae sing, their songs described by Margaret as 'golden' and were the treasures she had been looking for. She soon became their lodger in the village of North Glendale, living with them for six years and documenting the community's rich traditions.

Margaret later met and married folklorist John Lorne Campbell. In 1938, they settled on the Isle of Canna, where she continued her photographic and ethnographic work. Together, they travelled extensively to record Gaelic communities, preserving a vital cultural heritage. Her remarkable archive remains a vivid illustration of her dedication and passion for Scotland's language, music, and way of life.

### **About Canna House**

Canna House was built around 1863 by Donald Macneil, the owner of the island at that time. He was persuaded to build the house by his wife after she had returned from visiting wealthy relatives in Glasgow's Kelvingrove and thought that they deserved a house of similar stature and comfort. The house and the island were then sold to Robert Thom, a shipowner from Greenock, in 1881. He lived there with his extensive family until he sold the island to John Lorne Campbell in 1938.

Gaelic scholars John Lorne Campbell and Margaret Fay Shaw, who donated the island to the Trust, lived in Canna House until their respective deaths in 1996 and 2004. Together they amassed and researched a world-class collection of Gaelic songs, stories, poetry and a unique collection of butterflies and moths, which is all still contained in the house.

Within the sturdy Victorian walls is a substantial cultural archive of Gaelic folk songs and tales, Celtic and Norse Studies, philology, music, literature and Scottish history, as well as John and Margaret's furnishings, artworks and personal belongings. The Canna Archives contain Margaret's extensive photographic collection of over 6,000 images from the early 20th century in the Hebrides, John's 1,700 sound recordings, his Hebridean *Lepidoptera* collection and all their research writings amassed over 60 years.

An extensive and complex programme of work to repair and refurbish Canna House and protect its collections is now complete. The house is open for pre-booked guided tours where visitors can learn about the unique history of the house and the lives of Gaelic scholars John Lorne Campbell and Margaret Fay Shaw.

The project to fully repair and refurbish Canna House cost £3.6 million. Costs were met by the support of the National Trust for Scotland Foundation USA, a number of reserved funds held by the National Trust for Scotland intended for conservation projects of this nature, with the balance covered through funds generated by the charity's generous supporters, fundraising activities and commercial profits.

### **About Canna**

Canna is a small island to the south-west of Skye that supports a small and vibrant island community. The island setting of Canna boasts a complex mosaic of habitats – marine, littoral and terrestrial, many of national or regional significance. Of the most important are the base-rich grassland and cliff vegetation, the machair and maritime heath. Combining this diversity of habitats with the temperate, oceanic climate, Canna supports a maritime flora and fauna of great interest and beauty. It is of international importance for its colonies of seabirds, particularly shags, puffins, razorbills, black guillemots and formerly manx shearwaters, together with its raptors. The islands are also rich in archaeological interest, with current interests including coastal erosion and 3D interpretation opportunities.

### **About the Isle of Canna Community Development Trust**

The Isle of Canna Community Development Trust was set up to stimulate sustainable demographic growth supported by good employment opportunities, good services,

facilities and affordable housing. It provides a focus for the administration of community projects and a vehicle to manage assets on behalf of the community. In September 2021, the IOCCDT and the National Trust for Scotland set up the Canna Partnership with the aim to use the skills and experience of both the

community and the conservation charity to develop a positive future for Canna. The formal agreement means islanders are more deeply involved in the formal operational and strategic management of the island, working with the Trust to employ staff, develop island properties, deliver better services for visitors and look after Canna's unique cultural and natural heritage.

### **About the National Trust for Scotland**

Established in 1931, the National Trust for Scotland is Scotland's largest conservation charity and cares for, shares and speaks up for Scotland's magnificent heritage.

Over the last 90 years the Trust has pioneered public access to and shared ownership of some of the most magnificent buildings, collections and landscapes in Scotland. It cares for more than 100 sites, from ancient houses to battlefields, castles, mills, gardens, coastlines, islands, mountain ranges and the plants and animals which depend upon them.

In March 2022 the National Trust for Scotland launched *Nature, Beauty & Heritage for Everyone*, its ten-year strategy which sets out the ambitions of the charity over the coming decade. From speaking up for Scotland's heritage which doesn't have a voice, to improving the lives and wellbeing of people across the country, and responding to the climate and biodiversity crisis, the Trust will build on its work in recent years to grow its impact and conserve and restore more of Scotland's heritage, as it moves towards its centenary in 2031.

Scotland's largest membership organisation, the National Trust for Scotland relies on the support of its members and donors to carry out its important work.

For more information on the National Trust for Scotland visit [www.nts.org.uk](http://www.nts.org.uk).

The National Trust for Scotland is a charity registered in Scotland, Charity Number SC 007410.