

Interview with Charles Wilson, An Taigh Cèilidh, Stornoway (www.taighceilidh.com)

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Wilson McLeod

Feasgar math. 'S e mise Wilson McLeod, cathraiche Ionad Gàidhlig Dhùn Èideann agus tha mi an seo an-diugh còmhla ri Teàrlach Wilson, a stèidhich An Taigh Cèilidh ann an Steòrnabhagh. Feasgar math, a Theàrlach. I'm Wilson McLeod, chair of Ionad Gàidhlig Dhùn Èideann, and I'm here today with Charles Wilson, who has established An Taigh Cèilidh in Stornoway. And he's agreed to tell us about how An Taigh Cèilidh came to be, and what they've achieved in Stornoway. Ceud taing, a Theàrlach. So just to get started, could you tell us a bit about how the idea came to you, how you decided to start up An Taigh Cèilidh in the first place?

Charles Wilson

Sure. Well, it kind of started when I was doing my PhD and I was speaking to older Gaelic speakers in the islands that didn't speak English until they went to primary school. As Wilson will know, I was looking at grammar and dialect and variation, but to distract speakers from grammar, so they weren't giving me formal responses, but giving me relaxed natural Gaelic, I was talking to them about their lives, their communities, how things have changed in the islands, and so many of them had expressed a sadness for the cèilidh and the cèilidh house.

And so when I was writing up my PhD and began to wonder about what I was going to do next and I thought that the answers to - because I'm really passionate about Gaelic, and I really wanted to do something in the community - and with Covid going on, I was thinking about how we're going to get people back together, how we're going to get Gaelic normalised in Stornoway. The times I'd been to Stornoway before I opened An Taigh Cèilidh, I'd always been disappointed in the lack of opportunities to use Gaelic, despite the Western Isles being a traditional heartland.

And I got put in touch with Maggie Smith, who has been campaigning for Gaelic her entire life, from the Isle of Lewis, and we decided that we were going to look at the richness of Gaelic cultural heritage. We thought that Gaelic will have the answers to the problems that Gaelic faces when it comes to use of language in public spaces, building community, normalising language. addressing social isolation, making informal spaces for the language. Because for the most part so many people only, second language speakers and children are only using the language in formal spaces. And perhaps older first-language speakers aren't using the language in public. And we just thought Gaelic will have the answers. There's no need to reinvent the wheel.

So we turned to the cèilidh house and we decided that we were going to try and establish a cèilidh house in Stornoway. We decided on Stornoway rather than another part of the island because so many people have to come into Stornoway anyway, we thought, that an urban, or the closest thing to an urban area in the Western Isles would be better than a village where there might already be community projects. And we don't want to put pressure on those community projects. But we also want to be in a place where people are coming anyway, for the services, for the shops, for the transportation links.

And we decided that we were going to make it a not-for-profit organisation, though there was a lot of discussion about how we were going to move forward with a cèilidh house. How were we going to make a cèilidh house, make it viable and sustainable in the 21st century? And we decided that we were going to make it a not-for-profit enterprise that was going to generate income from sales rather than be dependent on grants. We didn't want to be dependent on grants because we wanted to do what we want with the money. Both of us were a little bit tired of form-filling and bureaucracy and reports, although that hasn't really stopped, especially as a not-for-profit. And when we made that decision to make it a community interest company, which is a legal company status, we then began to look for places to buy. We didn't really want to rent, because we thought that would be throwing money out the window. So we thought, we'll buy a place that will then belong to the community and the community can have complete control over and ownership of, people can feel that they are invested in the project and that the project belongs to them. It's funny because people come into An Taigh Cèilidh, and now and again I get introduced as the owner, and I always have to say no, the community is the owner, I don't own An Taigh Cèilidh at all.

And we found a space that was relatively cheap, but in really poor repair standard. So we applied for funding to get that renovated. And there's definitely been evolution since we opened. When we first opened we were trying our hardest to be a cèilidh house. So, for example, we had basic teas and coffees. We we thought, oh, the cèilidh house had the, you know, had the poit mhòr on the teine [big pot on the fire], and people were just kind of topping up the tea through the day. But we found, for example, people wanted coffees and wanted, you know, rudan spaideil [fancy things], cappuccinos and lattes and things like that. So after about six months, we had to cave into demand and and got a big massive coffee machine. So it's been a constant evolution ever since.

So now it's something like a cross between a cèilidh house and a coffee shop. But we are generating enough income to be financially independent. We still need some support because of the early stages that we're at. But our projections are showing a financially independent future.

Wilson McLeod

That is great. Now you mentioned sales, and that you do different kinds of sales. One thing you've been involved in selling has been Gaelic Scrabble. Could you say a bit about that?

Charles Wilson

Well, I was looking for things to sell in the shop that would be interesting and exciting. So I had played Welsh Scrabble and I'd seen Irish Scrabble and so I managed to get through to someone at the international headquarters of Scrabble in California. And knowing fully well they didn't, I asked, do you do Gaelic Scrabble? They said no, and I said, what will it take for you to do that? And they said, if someone did everything. So that's what we did in An Taigh Cèilidh: the translations, the letter distributions, the letter scores, the test games, we had multiple franking sets. And then I went back to Scrabble, also with a market research plan that I had done. I didn't get paid for that, but they did agree to put An Taigh Cèilidh's logo on the back of the box, so that's at least there. And we had exclusive rights to sell it for the first month, I think. I did not expect it to take off like it did. Scrabble had told me the minimum order was 1,000 boxes, and I was so anxious and there was such a big risk. The community is going to be so angry with me if this goes wrong and An Taigh

Cèilidh is not going to succeed before it's even really got off the ground if this goes wrong. And then when the national and international media picked it up, I was thinking, why didn't I order 2,000 boxes? We sold out quite quickly, and people still keep requesting Gaelic Scrabble from us. But due to issues in the Middle East, there've been no more boxes coming through because the Scrabble factory is in China, their headquarters are in California and their factory is in China. So all the boxes are somewhere waiting to come through.

But we really wanted to make Gaelic exciting and informal. I also thought it would be good educational tool. And yeah, I really wanted to make money for An Taigh Cèilidh. I mean, that was the main thing. But I wanted to do something that was somehow connected to language and revitalisation. And yeah, for the most part it has gone down well and is on display, you know, in our shop window, and we try to talk about it quite often. I mean, 50% of British households have a Scrabble set. You see I've done the research.

Wilson McLeod

Great. Could you say a bit about how large the space is that you have and what other kinds of activities you have going on?

Charles Wilson

The first thing I'm going to do is give you a quick tour. and then I'll tell you about some of the activities. This will give you an idea of the space. Hopefully, people won't mind being recorded but I will let them know. [Pans around the space]

So that's the space. It also has a bathroom. And this space across the road, I don't know if you can see it, we're currently in the process of purchasing that.

So the space that you saw there.

Wilson McLeod

How big is that, Teàrlach? In square metres, or square feet.

Charles Wilson

Oh, I'll have to look it up. I'm so sorry, I should know off by heart.

Wilson McLeod

No, that's okay.

Charles Wilson

When we got this space there was nothing here. There was no office, there was no counter. It was just a big empty room, with lots of mold and mildew and broken floorboards. And so it had undergo a complete transformation, and we had to make sure also that the aesthetic and design of the space worked for a cèilidh house.

It's a very busy time for us in the summer, because we have managed to get the attention of some tour companies. So we actually do events for people coming on the cruise ships and people coming on bus tours. And we teach them a song in Gaelic, we tell them a bit about the language and why it's important to keep the language alive, they get to meet members of the community and then we get them to try smoked salmon and and crowdie and cream while they're in the space. And that's a particularly important revenue stream for us. Other events have included, we have this month, is it next week or the week after, we have a trilingual music workshop, song workshop with Gaelic, Welsh and Breton. We have reading groups, we have conversation circles. We've tried our hardest to avoid formal things though, such as classes because we want to really maintain that informal space. We don't want it to become a classroom. The staff, for example, they are trained not to correct. So we we're not teachers, and we don't correct people using their Gaelic. Sometimes people expect us to, but they are just paying for coffee, not paying for a Gaelic course. We have to be quite boundaried in that way.

We also were doing Gaelic for wellbeing workshops, that was effectively just getting people together in a relaxed environment to socialize. A lot who attend have mental health issues or learning difficulties, or they face social isolation, and really Gaelic is just a tool to get them talking to each other and having fun. It's not really about getting to any fluency in Gaelic. They learn a song, and they say some fun things. And we found that about 87% of the people surveyed found that it did help their wellbeing, just to have fun with the language and undo some of that learning trauma I think that we have.

I'm just trying to think what other events we have, because we have quite a few. We have regular cèilidhs. Some are planned, some are impromptu. We have storytelling sessions. And we have plans for the future as well, especially when we get that new space. We intend to have a screen in there, so we will have film screenings. We intend to have a classroom in that space, because people do keep asking for classes and for courses. And so we are having to evolve, and we are having to respond to the demands on us. And people like this sort of laid back immersive experience that we offer.

Wilson McLeod

It sounds like it.

Charles Wilson

Yes.

Wilson McLeod

The place you're acquiring now, it looks like it's just across the street pretty much, is it?

Charles Wilson

Yes, yes, and it's exactly the same size.

So we're kind of joking that this will become the Gaelic quarter of Stornoway. We weren't expecting to grow so soon if I'm really honest. I thought this space would keep us going for a few years as sort of like a pilot project that would demonstrate the potential of Gaelic spaces like this, and I thought it would be really helpful for Ionad Gàidhlig Dhùn Èideann, An Lòchran, Cultarlann Inbhir Nis to see the potential, you know, what can be done in

such a small space? If a small space would work, then a big space would work. So I really kind of saw this as a pilot project. I wasn't expecting it to grow so quickly. And that has been very demanding on me and Magaidh. I mean, both of us are doing well over full-time hours to be able to keep this going because we're in that weird space where we're growing but we're not big enough yet to have departments. So we are in a sort of a middle ground. I did have a member of staff say to me the other day, 'oh, we need to start thinking about departments, like an HR department'. Oof! So I think it shows that a bigger building would work really well.

Wilson McLeod

I think so. Teàrlach, I think you've given us a really good overview, and I think we had probably better pause it there. So ceud taing airson sin, 's e sealladh gu math feumail agus tha e cho sònraichte agus cho ionmholta na tha sibh a' dèanamh leis An Taigh Cèilidh. It's very good and very impressive what you've been able to achieve so far.

Charles Wilson

I hope you'll come and visit soon.

Wilson McLeod

I certainly want to.

Charles Wilson

And we can show you some of our things like policies, language plans. Of course we've had to put those things in place, business plans, mission statements, all that sort of stuff. So hopefully you can come up and have a look at those things as well.

Wilson McLeod

Ceud taing. Tha mi a' coimhead air adhart ri sin. I'd really like to do that.