

'Why were they there? Why did they leave?'

By Alan Hendry
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EMPTY homes, and the fading reminders of those who once lived in them, form the backdrop to a thought-provoking exhibition that opens in Lybster next weekend.

Abandoned – inspired by the deserted houses of Caithness and Sutherland – features the work of photographer Angus Mackay and artist Jane McDonough.

It opens at Waterlines heritage centre on Saturday, November 23, and will run for three days a week until the week before Christmas.

Angus has produced a high-quality hardback book, with the same title, to tie in with the exhibition and will be signing copies at Waterlines on Saturday, November 16, from 11am.

In their different ways, Angus and Jane invite the viewer to consider the people who experienced the ups and downs of life in these sometimes lonely-looking places – and perhaps to reflect on themes of depopulation, erosion of community and the impermanence of life.

Angus sought permission before entering properties to photograph them. Treading carefully, he manages to capture the haunting atmosphere within damp and crumbling walls while being respectful to the individuals and families that are now long gone.

Close-ups reveal evidence of everyday human activity through random objects, now rusting away or covered in dust or cobwebs: stoves, kettles, a sewing machine, a typewriter, a radiogram, old newspapers. Aerial shots give a sense of vast surrounding landscapes.

"I have always been fascinated by old houses," Angus explained. "But it was after lockdown in 2020, when business had dried up overnight and I had time on my hands, and social distancing was an issue, that I decided to find an abandoned house to photograph."

"I had one in mind and, after getting permission, I went and

Photo exhibition focuses on old houses and long-gone lives



Angus Mackay has produced a hardback book to tie in with the Abandoned exhibition and will be signing copies at Waterlines on November 16.



Upper Borgue, where the last resident moved out in the 1980s (from Abandoned, by Angus Mackay).

shot as much as I could, and even went back for a second visit. And I soon realised how much I loved it – photographing the evidence of the lives lived there, and imagining the who, what, when and, most of all, why of it all.

"Why were they there in the first

place, why did they leave, and why did nobody replace them?

"Initially I would post wee selections of the shots of each of the abandoned homes on my business Facebook page, and was amazed to discover I wasn't the only one with a thirst for more information on these intriguing places.

"I loved all the memories that were posted in the comments, and even received photos of some of the homes in better times. Even now, I see wee details in some of the photos I took that I never noticed before, and sometimes others point out things I never noticed."

"Although I use the word 'abandoned' to describe the former homes in the book, it is by no means intended as a criticism of those that own them, as there are so many perfectly valid reasons why it can happen. Maybe there should be a wider discussion for us all to look at ways of avoiding it happening in the future."

"And it isn't always the end of the story, and often only part of an evolution or part of the journey for that property."



Angus says he wants to get people thinking about all the abandoned buildings around us (from Abandoned, by Angus Mackay).



Stove close-up at Achow (from Abandoned, by Angus Mackay).



The house at Upper Borgue was built on the site of a broch (from Abandoned, by Angus Mackay).

"I know of plans for at least three of the houses featured in the book to be modernised and lived in again. I have also been invited into buildings pre-renovation, to create a record of what they were for posterity."

"Although I have now photographed lots of abandoned buildings, I have always sought permission to photograph inside. It seems some so-called 'explorers' do not respect locked doors or closed windows, and think that, as a house has been empty for a while, it's okay to essentially break in."

"It sometimes takes a bit of effort to establish who owns a property, but it's only right to ask. I have only been refused permission once, and, although the door was only 'locked' with string, I respected that."

"The main objective for me in publishing the book is to get people thinking about all the

abandoned buildings around us.

"Nobody in Caithness or Sutherland lives any distance from a building, or the remains of one, that was once a home. But the evidence and insight they offer into a different age can soon be lost forever."

After starting on November 23, the exhibition at Waterlines will be open on Thursday, Friday and Saturday, from 10am to 3pm, until Saturday, December 21.

The photographs and artwork will be available to buy.

Angus's book, Abandoned, with layout by Ken McArthur of North Design, costs £25. It is available through his website – www.angusmackay.co.uk/abandoned – and at several outlets in Caithness and Sutherland: Glencoast, Helmsdale; the River Bothy, Berriedale; Waterlines, Lybster harbour; Puldagon Farm Shop and Restaurant, near Wick;

Angus enjoys photographing the evidence of the lives lived in old homes (from Abandoned, by Angus Mackay).



and Caithness Livestock Breeders, Thurso.

Angus, who lives in Latheronwheel, is hoping to take part in workshops for all ages linked to the exhibition at Waterlines.

"Hopefully that may develop into working with schools or community groups in other parts of Caithness or Sutherland," he said.

"I'd love to see if I can inspire interest and stir the imaginations in both those who remember living in homes like these and those who can only imagine having an outdoor toilet and no electricity. There is so much social history just disappearing before our eyes.

"I also live in hope that there are still properties out there that may have been abandoned many years ago, and are like little time capsules, which their owners would like to be photographed for posterity. If you have one, please let me know!"



Looking out from Cooper's Building, the second building to be constructed in Latheronwheel (from Abandoned, by Angus Mackay).



Dalemore, Halkirk (from Abandoned, by Angus Mackay).



The Abbey, by Jane McDonough.

Uninhabited houses tell a story of a time and place, says Caithness artist

CAITHNESS-BASED artist Jane McDonough enjoys painting landscapes that she feels emotionally connected to. In many cases these feature isolated, unoccupied houses, and she finds herself wondering who lived there and what kind of lives they led.

Jane's fascination with the deserted homes of the far north has led her to team up with photographer Angus Mackay for Abandoned, an exhibition that opens at Waterlines heritage centre in Lybster next weekend and runs three days a week until just before Christmas.

"Having the opportunity to work collaboratively with Angus has really inspired me to create pieces of work that I am proud to showcase in the Abandoned exhibition," Jane said.

"My pieces complement Angus's work, and are a collection of my favourite abandoned houses in Caithness and Sutherland.

"I have produced some paintings on canvas for the exhibition and I paint using acrylics. I've been working on some pen drawings that will be framed for the exhibition too. I also have a small number of



Jane McDonough.

canvas prints, limited-edition prints and cards."

Jane hopes to have around 10 paintings of different sizes in the exhibition, along with four or five pen drawings.

She works as an early years practitioner, so usually she only has time to paint at weekends or during school holidays.

Her sweeping landscapes and dramatic skies feature regularly in local exhibitions: the Society of Caithness Artists' annual show in Thurso and the East Sutherland Art Society exhibition in Golspie.

Jane also exhibits in the biennial Aird Fundraising Group for the Highland Hospice in Beaulieu. Her solo exhibition Unspoken Truths was on show at venues throughout Scotland from 2017-2019.

She has lived in Latheron for

just over 16 years.

"I feel very blessed to live where I do, with beautiful scenery in every direction and the ever-changing dramatic skies which are a source of inspiration," Jane said.

"I enjoy painting landscapes that I have an emotional connection with and that I find thought-provoking – especially old uninhabited houses that tell a story of a time and place.

"I gather most of my inspiration by exploring the landscapes of Caithness in all weathers with my horse, Fudge. I like finding out about the history of the houses and hearing stories about the people who lived there.

"The houses that I am particularly drawn to are the ones that are in the most rural locations, and usually in the most beautiful surroundings. I always wonder who lived there and what their lives would have been like.

"I feel emotional about walking in the footsteps of a time past, and what memories these old buildings must hold."

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East Cairnfin, by Jane McDonough.