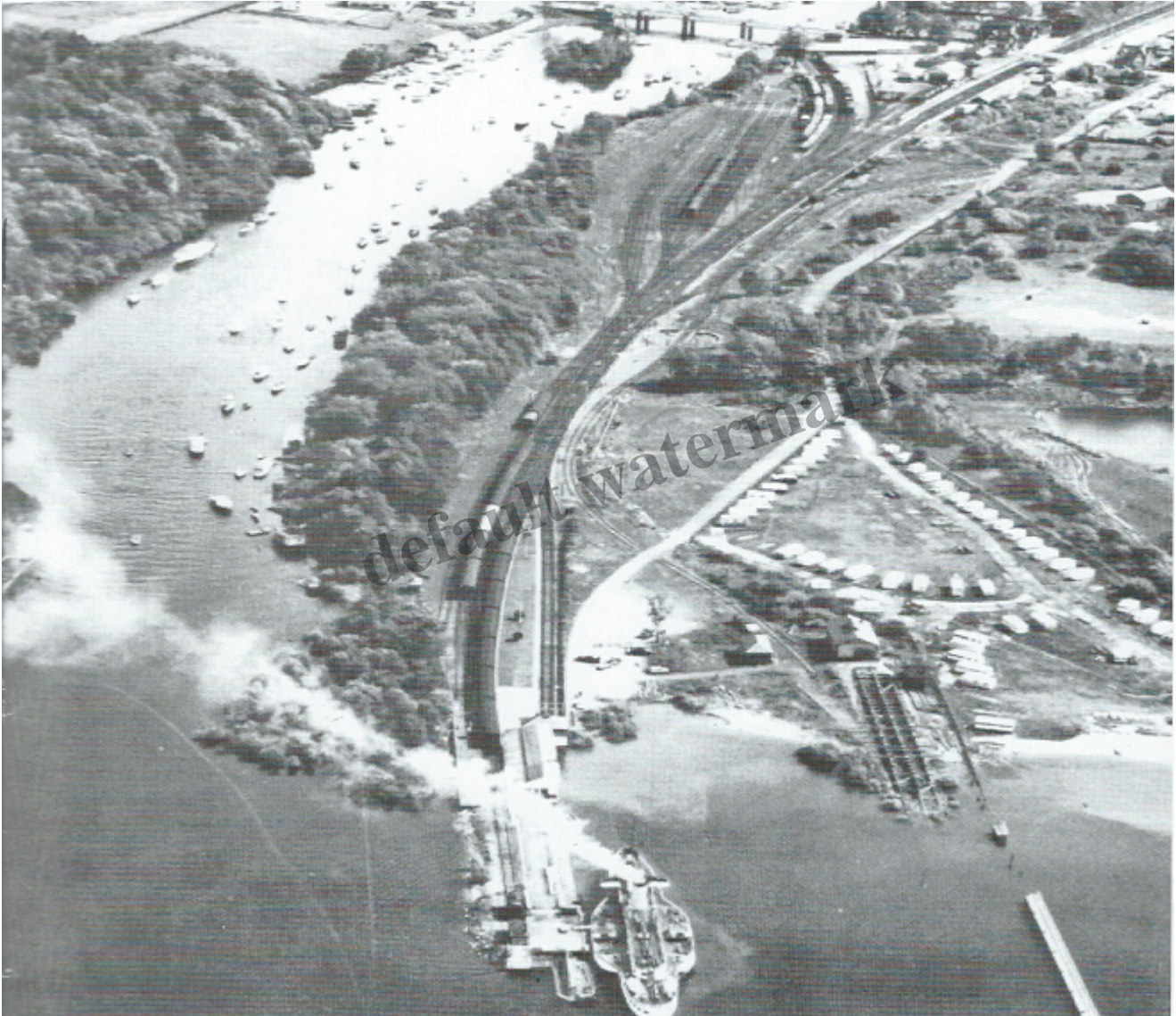


Is the tourism potential of Balloch, Loch Lomond finally going to be realised in an appropriate way? By James Fraser

Description



As the gateway to Loch Lomond and the unofficial capital of Scotland's first National Park the village of Balloch should be the jewel in the crown of Loch Lomond and one of Scotland's top tourist destinations. However, it has failed to live up to this billing for some time now which, in part, is due its industrial past, fragmented land ownerships and various abortive attempts by the private and public sector to realise its full tourism potential. Is this all about to change with the emergence of the £33 million plans for the former derelict land at West Riverside and the derelict and unsightly Grade A Hamilton House site between Loch Lomond Shores and the A82? Will this turn the village and the nearby £45million Loch Lomond Shores into a year round holiday resort destination instead of a dislocated village dominated by Loch Lomond Shores where there is predominantly an 11.00am-

4.00pm day visitor economy separated from the 'old village' by the partially reclaimed West Riverside site? Will more much needed year round jobs be created with decent wages to replace some of the large number of jobs lost in nearby Vale of Leven? It is difficult to say at this stage due to the scant information that has been announced by Scottish Enterprise who have kept their 'preferred developers' at arms length from the local community and other interested parties such as the Friends of Loch Lomond for more than 9 months now despite the Balloch Charrette (a supposedly dynamic and open community planning consultation exercise) providing a golden opportunity for the developers to sit in and obtain a flavour of what the local community wants as well as sharing their preliminary plans.

Unwittingly, the secrecy of Scottish Enterprise and the clumsy way they have handled the PR so far has proved to be a major setback for the ambition to realise Balloch's tourism potential with several petitions and reams of negative press emerging over the past month or so to try and block any plans that the Scots owners of Flamingo Land have for the village. This is a great pity and probably could have been avoided if SE officials had engaged in a more open and meaningful consultative process at a much earlier stage and hadn't hidden behind 'commercial confidentiality' screens. Hopefully the situation can be retrieved and there will now be more open and meaningful dialogue with the local community and interested parties to help shape plans that could be of major benefit to the village as it seeks to realise its tourism potential in a way that greatly enhances its status as the gateway to the National Park and the unofficial capital of the National Park. Time will tell.

In the pre and post Second World War era Balloch was a hugely popular destination with a large section of the West of Scotland population being regular visitors when the factories shut on a Friday night and thousands of workers and their families made a break for the clean air of nearby Loch Lomond with its range of simple and largely free recreational opportunities. This began to change in the 1960s and 1970s with the advent of the cheap sun package holidays which, for decades now, has seen tens of thousands from the Greater Glasgow area taking flight overseas resulting in the Glasgow Fair fortnight being one of the quieter periods in Balloch. Notwithstanding this, Loch Lomond (not Balloch) has remained the number one countryside day visitor destination in Scotland largely due to its close proximity to large concentrations of population. There have been some notable tourism investments by local companies such as the long established and family owned Sweeney's Cruises and more recently by some national pub and hotel chains.

Scottish Enterprise and House of Fraser spent close on £45 million on the phase 1 Loch Lomond Shores development which opened in 2002 to coincide with the establishment of the National Park. The central feature of this development, Drumkinnon Tower, which cost the taxpayer around £14 million, quickly failed and had to be re-invented following a costly conversion into a Sealife Centre. However, in recent years Loch Lomond Shores has begun to flourish largely due to the hard work and dedication of the small management team led by Clare Gemmill who has introduced a strong and very successful events led programme. A number of businesses have stuck with Loch Lomond Shores through leaner times and are now hopefully in a much healthier position trading wise. The Park Authority has encouraged some outdoor activity and birdlife operators to locate there too in recent

years and has also directly invested in much needed boat trip pontoon facilities connecting the loch and the shores development for the first time. Plans are also being progressed to convert the National Park Gateway Centre into a restaurant and events venue. This publicly funded facility has sadly lain empty for several years now despite still being signposted on the main road network.

It has been interesting to see the five or so articles on 'Parkswatch' relating to the outline plans for the land at West Riverside linked with a good dose of agency bashing. I don't believe the National Park Authority deserves a bashing in this instance as they have not been leading the efforts to interest developers in the site-this has been the sole responsibility of Scottish Enterprise as landowners on behalf of the Scottish Government and taxpayers. Makes for good copy though but factually incorrect, particularly in some of the earlier articles regarding issues such as the non- advertisement of the site . It has been widely advertised in publications like the Herald and the potential range of site uses has been listed on a large hoarding prominently displayed next to the Balloch end of the site and adjacent to the tourist information centre for several years at least. Various schemes for the site have come and gone over the past 30 years or so. There have also been several preferred bidders over the last 7 years but they have never quite made it over the line for various reasons including, allegedly, Scottish Enterprise's unwillingness to fund further land remedial works. However, you are correct in mentioning the site was formerly derelict . Going back to the 1980s much of the site was a no go area with contaminated land linked to its former uses as a silk dye works factory, extensive railway sidings and sand and gravel workings. Much of the site was abandoned derelict land which had been neglected for many years by the owners of three separate pieces of land.

The attached photo above, which was taken around 1960, provides a birds eye view of the site which is currently the subject of so much controversy. Hardly a picture postcard extolling the scenic qualities of Loch Lomond! Admittedly, much of the dereliction no longer exists but the site doesn't have high scenic qualities and is still generally in a poor condition. You can clearly see the extent of the land covered by railway sidings and the former rail link with the pier where Maid of the Loch is moored awaiting restoration. In the middle foreground you can see the steam beam engine house and slipway. This has been restored by the Steamship charity with funding support from HLF, Scottish Enterprise and others (£600k plus) and they organise popular steam days throughout the main tourist season. Interesting also to see part of the site next to the disused gravel pits was used as a caravan park with more than 60 static caravans in view. You can also see part of the former silk dye works site in the middle right of the picture which has largely been covered by a housing estate now. This used to be dominated by large chimney stacks which acted as a navigation beacon for boat users on the loch.

In the mid 1980s the Area Tourist Board tackled some of the dereliction on the edges of the site with the use of 100 or so unemployed people from the Vale of Leven with the help of Manpower Services Commission funding as part of 'Operation Bonnie Banks'. This resulted in a safe beach area being created, the removal of the remains of dangerous and unsightly brick walls as part of the main gated entrance to the silk dye works and much more as part of an effort trying to provide some useful jobs for the long term unemployed and addressing civic pride issues. A great success with limited resources .

At that time the Scottish Tourist Board also joined forces with Bredero to have a comprehensive look at what could be done longer term if the piecemeal land ownerships were brought together. A major development options study was undertaken and concluded there was scope to develop an indoor leisure centre (similar to Rhyl Sun Centre in North Wales) and housing. Some time later Cala Homes came forward with an ambitious plan to cover the site in luxury housing with those on the loch front having their own private boat moorings. Dumbarton District Council planners in their wisdom recommended approval but thankfully Councillors refused the development planning permission after listening to the strong representation from the Friends of Loch Lomond, the Area Tourist Board and the Balloch community who argued that this was too important a site for recreation and tourism to be allowed to be developed for housing. An expensive public inquiry was then held and the late Hannah Stirling, the then Chairman of the Friends of Loch Lomond contributed a substantial sum to hire a QC to fight the case along with local Councillors and the Area Tourist Board. Fortunately the case was won by the objectors and Scottish Enterprise was encouraged to purchase the site and to progress plans primarily for tourism and leisure development.

This is the background to what led to the phase 1 Loch Lomond Shores development and there was always an intention to develop a phase 2 to link the centre of Balloch with the lochshore more effectively. Much earlier in the early days of the Joint Committee which preceded the creation of a National Park the then Scottish Development Agency was encouraged to purchase the West Riverside site which was owned by British Rail. They worked with the Joint Committee and the Area Tourist Board to restore the derelict former railway station building in the centre of Balloch which was converted into a tourist information centre and offices. The land between the Station building and Balloch Pier beside the River Leven was also restored and extensively landscaped with a new path. Derelict moorings and sunken boats were also removed from the West Riverside edge of the River Leven with the help of Loch Lomond Association.

Various attempts have been made over the years to market all or part of the site for hotel and leisure development with mixed success. Occasionally Scottish Enterprise have mooted the idea of part of the land being used for housing but this has been strongly resisted by the Friends and others. There was also previously a couple of preferred bidders to develop the site which fell by the wayside for a variety of reasons. In previous cases and this case the site was well advertised by Scottish Enterprise. The site has also appeared in local Development Plans as an area with tourism and recreation development potential.

Given this site history (apologies for the level of detail but I think it is important to set the context) the Friends and others have been consistent in their desire to see the site being developed for a range of tourism and recreational uses. However, this doesn't mean we will accept anything and we will be reviewing the latest plans very carefully though it does appear the general thrust of what is planned is entirely consistent with what has been proposed for the site for many years with strong riverside

boardwalk links between the centre of Balloch and a mix of family orientated tourist accommodation and recreation facilities.

I wonder if the company selected to work up a scheme for this former derelict site hadn't been called Flamingoland if there would be such a furore? Had Forest Trails come forward with a scheme here I doubt it. Pleased to see glamping and a much needed youth hostel featuring in the emerging proposals given the loss several years ago of Loch Lomond Youth Hostel to a private house and the emergence of Balloch as a key location where the John Muir Way and Three Lochs Way Great Walking Trails merge. It will be interesting to see in due course what the eventual mix of accommodation is by type and price point. Sounds as if they are aiming to serve a wide range of socio-economic groups which would be very welcome as not everyone can afford to stay at the up market Cameron House and neighbouring timeshare lodges.

The detail of the preliminary plans have not yet been made public, apart from the scant information in the poorly pulled together news release issued by Scottish Enterprise, so let's not pre-judge their plans and prematurely question Flamingo land's ability to deliver a quality tourism development along the lines of a possible mini-Center Parcs with a blend of accommodation and indoor and outdoor recreation facilities that are potentially a 'good fit' at this location. Scottish Enterprise needs to remove the shackles now from the preferred developers so that they can meaningfully engage with the local community and other interested parties. The Friends are on the case and following an approach to a local businessman who is involved in the project a preliminary exploratory meeting with the owner of Flamingoland has now been held. Direct communication channels have also been established with the Community Council. There is much work still to be undertaken investigating ground conditions, traffic management issues and more before a revised master plan for the site is finalised. However, a preliminary viewing of the outline plans suggests the developers are taking account of the sensitivities of this important site at the southern end of the loch and the plans are far removed from what has been suggested in the press and elsewhere. Hopefully there will be an opportunity to influence the final plans as they are worked up into a detailed masterplan prior to a detailed planning application being submitted to the National Park Authority.

I hope this note helps bring some balance to the current debate on the future of what is the last major site for tourism and recreation development in the Loch Lomond area . I am hopeful that a scheme emerges which meets the aspirations of local residents and visitors from all backgrounds and socio economic groups. Incidentally, great news that West Dunbartonshire Council has recently committed £1.4 million for two village squares and public realm works in the centre of Balloch which emerged as community priorities during the recent planning charrette exercise. Just goes to show the agencies do sometimes take on board community wish lists. Shame though about loss of land next to NPA HQ for housing instead of much needed car parking. The recent announcement on the planned £33 million investment by Flamingoland reinforces the folly of this decision by the NPA Board members based on the recommendation of planners who failed to recognise the importance of providing more parking at key locations such as this close to the main street in the village and the entrance to Balloch Castle Country Park. Not convinced the Balloch Charrette final report or the preliminary study terms of

reference for work on the village square at the former railway station have fully grasped the scale of future car and coach parking requirements to ensure Balloch flourishes as a year round quality tourist destination but that is another story.

Category

1. Loch Lomond and Trossachs

Tags

1. flamingo land
2. LLTNPA
3. planning
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