

Historic Scotland podcast:

Series 2, Episode 7 transcript

Chapter 1

Sarah's intro:

Hello, it's Sarah. We're on the home run. This is our penultimate episode this season, recorded on the amazing Isle of Lewis. It really felt like stepping into another way of life, and the cold March weather gave us the perfect conditions to experience a place like this.

I hope you enjoy listening. And remember, as an Historic Scotland member, you've got access to this exclusive member-only version, which includes some behind-the-scenes content at the end. Oh, yes. Enjoy.

Hello and welcome to the Historic Scotland podcast. My name's Sarah MacGillivray. I'm an actor and writer with a passion for people, place and story.

Each episode we travel to a different site, chat to the people that take care of it and uncover its surprising story.

Today we're on the Isle of Lewis at the Arnol Blackhouse, a rare surviving example of a traditional Hebridean home. We're stepping inside and transporting ourselves to a time when people and animals lived side by side under one roof and discovering what daily life was really like.

I'm chatting to Marlene Macleod, who's managed this monument for over 15 years.

Marlene:

Today it's freezing outside but it's so cozy by the fire.

Sarah:

And to Ali Davey, who's shining some light on the traditional techniques that were used in the creation of the Blackhouse and still are today.

Ali:

We obviously can see the straw through the roof, through the roof timbers, but up to about three quarters of the height of this roof there's actually a layer of turf.

Chapter 2

01:45

Sarah:

The first thing I noticed when I visited the Blackhouse was the sea. Then it's the smell.

The Blackhouse in Arnol on the west shore of the Isle of Lewis is one of Scotland's most remote locations.

Marlene:

Tar isteach. I'll put the fire on.

Sarah:

You're getting the bits of peat and putting them into the fire, so there's a peat fire. Does this burn all the time?

Marlene:

Yeah, all day, all night.

Sarah:

All day, all day, all night? It never goes out?

Marlene:

Yeah, we never put it out.

Sarah:

You keep the peat fire burning?

Marlene:

Yeah.

Sarah:

That's Marlene. Oh, you can really smell it. It's quite a distinctive, strong smell, isn't it?

Marlene:

Tar isteach.

Sarah:

What's that mean?

Marlene:

Come in. Come to my fire.

Sarah:

She's been looking after the site for over 15 years.

Marlene:

Cupa tì. The kettle's boiling.

Sarah:

Cupa ti.

It's hard to describe the Blackhouse to you. It's constructed from local stone with a thatched roof weighted down by ropes and stones to withstand the Atlantic gales.

The house looks sunken into the ground slightly, but it isn't. It's small. Its layout is as practical as it is charming.

A byre, which is a place where livestock is kept, like a stable, and a living space all under one roof. A central fire with no chimney and thick walls that held in warmth while keeping out the wind and the rain.

And it's around that fire that I got to know Marlene.

So this was the centre of the home?

Marlene:

Yeah, this was Mum's place.

And, you know, in some respects, people say she would have everything shiny. Everything would have been cleaned constantly.

And, you know, they always ask us, how come there's baking things out here. But it was there because she was making scones and flatbread and stuff on the fire. And it was always, when the men came in, it was there for them to eat.

Do you think about what you can do at the fire? They were making their own cheese. They were doing all that.

They had the cow next door. She'd just go and get her milk. She didn't need to go to a supermarket.

It was all there. It was all really good.

Sarah:

Organic. Self-sufficient.

Marlene:

And I don't know, today we all talk about bone broth. That was the staple diet here then.

They would put a bit of meat with barley and vegetables. There were plenty of vegetables.

And there was a lot then, before climate change, there was lots of barley here as well.

So they would have that on all day so it was like thick by the end of the day. So they were getting all the goodness and the meat was falling apart.

So it was all, today we're taking all these supplements and drink shots, but that's how they lived.

Sarah:

So there'd be constant sort of broth over the fire, ready for you when you came home to eat.

Marlene:

Always a pan of soup. Absolutely. And the kettle was on, cup of tea.

Sarah:

Yeah, always a cup of tea ready.

Marlene:

And a scone.

Sarah:

A scone?

Marlene:

And cream. Their own cream she would have had from there and her own cheese.

Sarah:

It's amazing.

Marlene

And it's so simple. You know, we can make cheese over the fire here and it's the easiest thing to make.

Sarah:

Is it? How do you make cheese?

Marlene

Just like milk and add a wee bit of apple cider vinegar to it.

Sarah:

And then it starts to turn into cheese.

Marlene:

It's so quick and easy. And they would have probably used any kind of vinegar that would have been around then for pickling. They would have used it to make their cheese and all the like different mushrooms and herbs are outside that we don't use, but people are starting to use now. They would have used all that.

Sarah:

So just completely connected with the land and knowing what was growing around them and what to use, when to use it.

Marlene:

Absolutely, so it was very cozy and through the day the granny or the mother would be in here doing all the food and everything. And then when the men came in in the evening, there would be a big bath here.

Sarah:

A big bath here, just in the same room?

Marlene:

In the same room and the children would be bathed first and the same water and then it would be the man from outside, because he was the dirtiest, so he was last. So he would be last to be bathed.

Sarah:

Can you tell us about peat because peat is so important to this area, isn't it?

Marlene:

Yeah. People, I think now with the oil prices they're starting to do more peat. I can see more people doing it this year.

Chapter 3:

05:55

Sarah:

Peat is a soft spongy fuel made from partly decayed plants. The Isle of Lewis is covered in it thanks to its wet boggy ground. It burns well because it's rich in carbon, meaning it catches fire easily and gives off steady heat.

Marlene:

You go out, and first thing you have to do is, at this time of year, you start turving. So you take away the heather and the top layer. And then you're left. And the first layer of peat, it's quite a spongy peat.

We use it at night so that it can be used for keeping the fire going because it's spongier. It doesn't dry out completely.

The next layer of peat, it's like a three layer, is more an every day. So that's what we have on just now. It's like it burns nice and it's quite a crisp peat.

And then the very bottom, it's honestly, it's like coal. It's so thick. So if you're wanting to heat something up really quickly, you put these ones on.

So I'll give you an idea. It's like...

Sarah:

Oh, yeah, you can see that...

Marlene:

You can see the difference.

Sarah:

It is like picking up a bit of coal.

Marlene:

And that's the middle one.

Sarah:

That's the middle. So that's what...

Marlene:

I haven't got any of the top one. It's probably more like the spongy. Yeah, that's it. It stays as spongy.

But it's handy at night. Because in the morning there's still a fire going when I come in.

Sarah:

And is there peat all around this area?

Marlene:

Every household gets an allocation for a peat bank. And if you cut it every year, that's fine. If you stop cutting it, the allocation can go to someone else. It's not yours forever. It's only if you're using it.

So the Blackhouse has one and it's just down the road. It's not far for us to go. And two of the boys that work here, they cut the peats for us. So it's good. It's all kept in-house. We do everything ourselves.

Sarah:

Try to do it as it always would have been done.

Marlene:

Yeah, absolutely. And in May, we have the young ones coming, the primary sevens from all the schools. And we teach them all the traditional skills. So they learn everything. Peat cutting, they learn how to shear, they learn how to do... They learn all about the Blackhouse and what it was like. They learn how to twist wool. They learn all the traditional skills. And it's a whole week and it's fantastic. It's one of my favourite times of the year.

This is the bedroom. Do you want to come through?

Sarah:

Yeah, thank you.

Marlene:

Now, the bedroom's quite big when you think of the size.

Sarah:

It is quite big. Yeah.

Marlene:

But in the beds here, now, it was horse-hair mattresses that used to be here.

Sarah:

Okay. So that's what it traditionally would be.

Marlene:

Yeah, it would have been.

Sarah:

Horse-hair mattresses.

Marlene:

It's just for hygiene. That's why we've got this wrong. But there was a shelf in some of them for babies, for the smaller ones. So they would have like a wee cot thing in there. And it's hot. But there'd be about three or four kids in each box bed. Just so squished in. Have you got a light on that?

Sarah:

I've got a light on my phone.

Marlene:

I'll show you. I know. If you look at the wood here, you'll see all the wood was driftwood. So you can see all the seawater. Now, I would love it if we could turn it around because it's so beautiful. But of course, traditionally, they were hiding the fact that their wood was driftwood. But it's so pretty.

Sarah:

It's so pretty, the shapes it's made, it's gorgeous, it's on the inside of the beds. And they wouldn't want anyone to see that, so they turned it around.

Marlene:

But everything in here has been made with driftwood, all the stuff.

Sarah:

And this is all the original stuff, and this is how it was when it came into here.

Marlene:

When she left, it was 1966, she left everything so it would be left as a monument. And actually, the daughter that was living here, she became monument manager.

Sarah:

No way, really?

Marlene:

She started running it and she was introducing visitors to her own home.

Sarah:

How funny. It's incredible. So it was just left, exactly. So when the women moved out...

Marlene:

Yeah. Historic Scotland came in and it was actually a paid monument from day one. She used to sit where we've got the barrow today and sell postcards and invite people into her home.

Sarah:

To have a look around.

Marlene:

To have a look around.

Sarah:

What was her name?

Marlene:

Crisetta.

Sarah:

Crisetta. That's amazing.

Marlene:

I know.

Sarah:

Tell the stories of her home.

Marlene:

Tell the stories all about herself, yeah.

Sarah:

Bringing up her children.

Marlene:

Yeah, and her granny, well, her mother and the granny before that was Catriona that was in here.

Sarah:

That's brilliant, they just like left and left everything in place.

Marlene:

Yeah, but the Royal Commission had built the house next door for them.

Sarah:

The white house.

Marlene:

Yeah.

Sarah:

So they moved into the white house, which is now the visitor centre, is it?

Marlene:

Yeah. So this is Harris Tweed, though we've just used this, well it's to cover the top of the other bunk bed.

Sarah:

And so all the family would have been here. And I heard this thing about bundling.

Marlene:

Yeah, that's what they're all in the ...

Sarah:

That's when they're all getting and just all cozy together. All their children and all the family bundled.

Marlene:

Yeah, all the boys in one, all the girls in one so.

Sarah:

And the mum and dad up here?

Marlene:

Uh no and this one, but this was actually the granny's in this house but it probably was the parents that would have been in it but this was granny's. This was where Catriona slept but I don't know if you can see the indent on the end there. It's a local cat that comes in and sleeps there now at night. Cozy for the fire to get away from everyone else. But it keeps any mice away, so it's quite handy.

Chapter 4

11:27

Sarah:

And the tweed, so obviously Harris Tweed as we know it, as its official name.

Marlene:

Well, our blankets were all made by a man from Barvas. All the blankets on the island. And the man's still alive. I think he's nearly 100. But he was a blanket weaver for the island. They called him Tartan but amazing guy. I managed to get to speak to him when we were talking about these blankets and telling us the design. So they're all made from Harris wool but cotton as well. So he was putting cotton strands in it to strengthen them, and that's why they're still strong. That blanket's probably over 100 years old.

Sarah:

Wow, it looks good as new.

Marlene:

Yeah, and we how we wash them is, we go to the stream with our wellies and we wash them with cold water. If you wash with warm water with the sooty blanket it would start getting hard like a tar. The cold water it runs away and it's so clean. So we wash them a couple of times a year, just to keep it, but we do it in the burn when there's a good spate of water. We just have our wellies and we just stamp on them and we just wash them that way.

Sarah:

And the water just runs through.

Marlene:

It runs through and it's nice and clean then but because of the fire all the time it does get sooty.

Chapter 5

12:40

Sarah:

To modern ears, what you're about to hear might seem unusual, but here, under one roof, it made perfect sense. Animals were kept just a few feet from where people lived and slept. Cattle, in particular, were vital to survival, providing milk, warmth and security through the long Hebridean winters.

The byre was dark, earthy, but alive, filled with the sounds and smells of livestock. But it also served a practical purpose. The animals' body heat helped warm the house, and their presence reflected a way of life built on close and constant connection with the land.

Sarah:

And what's down here?

Marlene:

This is the byre.

Sarah:

The byre?

Marlene:

This is where she had her two cows. So there'd be two cows here, and there were only milking cows. So, and the cows then, they were quite short. That's why the door's the height it is. It was only high enough to get the cow in and out. It wasn't, you didn't have it any higher or any lower.

Sarah:

Right, that was the height of the door.

Marlene:

And if you notice, the other door is lower. And that's because they didn't want the cow in that way. Because that's where all the food was kept. The barn was all the food and the byre was the animals. So she had two cows, eight chickens, eight sheep. That was the allocation they were given, each area. But eventually they were allowed more. But initially that's all they were allowed. It was enough to keep you alive, not enough to make you money. So that's the way it was.

Sarah:

So who was then... That was the landlords would give you that? Every blackhouse had that allocation.

Marlene:

Yeah, that's all you were allowed. Some people couldn't even afford that, but they weren't allowed more.

Sarah:

I think Ali's going to talk to us about the roof, isn't she? And the traditional skills on the roof. But it's amazing having the fire going, and there's no chimney, is there? And no windows? There are a few windows? Would there have been windows?

Marlene:

There's heather turf on the roof here, but above the fire there isn't. There's just the straw. And it sort of seeps through. And when we're changing the straw, we keep that bit, and that's used as fertiliser. And there's usually somebody in the village that wants it because it's had the peat smoke over it. So it's a really good fertiliser. And people still use that method. So they're desperate for it because we've still got it here. But that was common practice then.

Sarah:

So they just at some point would change the level of the fire?

Marlene:

They do a top-up every year and they do a full every 10 years. But we've been doing it more frequently because the weather has changed dramatically. There's a lot more rain than there used to be. It used to be very seasonal, whereas now it seems to be... The temperature can go from January right through to November, 8 to 12 degrees and hardly have any spikes, hardly have any spikes up or hardly have any spikes down.

Sarah:

So we just stay within that.

Marlene:

Yeah, which is very, I don't know, it's very hard to judge what's happening with the climate because we've got a weather station and we're monitoring it. But it's strange. The wind chill can be very cold here. I'm sure you felt it.

Sarah:

We have noticed, yes. Sometimes you're like, oh, it's okay. And then the wind will blow on it. It can be quite bitter.

Marlene:

Yeah, absolutely. Yeah.

Chapter 6

16:04

Sarah:

It's hard to state just how warm and sheltered and insular the Blackhouse feels. It's cosy, it's homely. There's something primitive about it but also something so charming. A lot of that is in the walls but also in the roof.

Ali joined me. She's helping to keep traditional skills alive here at the Arnol Blackhouse.

Ali:

So my name is Ali Davey. I'm a project manager in the technical conservation team in Cultural Assets. And my job is to run projects that help us make sure that we can have access to the traditional materials that we need to look after all of Scotland's heritage buildings, and that we have access to the knowledge that we need to use all of those materials.

Sarah:

That sounds like a great job, by the way.

Ali:

It's a dream job.

Sarah:

Is it?

Ali:

It's dreamy, yeah.

Sarah:

It sounds it, because yeah, you must get, there must be such a variety of places and materials and knowledge to be working with.

Ali:

Every day is a school day as well. You learn so much. I'm a jack of all trades, master of none, but you meet incredible people who know so much about really niche things. So you always meet fascinating people and I always love, I've always been interested in how things are made and where they come from. So like I get to learn that every day about different materials. So it's, yeah, it's fascinating.

Sarah:

Like the people who would have lived in this home, Ali's work is rooted in a deep understanding of the landscape and it's that connection which lies at the heart of everything she does.

On the surface, thatching is, of course, just about building a roof, but it's also about working with the land itself, using local materials, reading the weather and, of course, shaping something that can withstand the Atlantic winds. It's a craft that's not just practical, but deeply connected to the place it comes from.

So this is a very cool place, a warm place right now because we've got a peat fire going. So can you tell us about your connection with the Blackhouse?

Ali:

Sure. One of the areas of research that we're focusing on at the moment is thatching materials. And of course, we're inside an amazing building that shows off the amazing properties of this material and character of it. And how these materials bring such character to what we think of as thatched buildings that really define part of the heritage of the Western Isles.

So we only have about 250 thatched buildings left in Scotland, which is not very many, considering there would have been thousands, you know, 200 years ago. And the really interesting thing about Scotland is that it wasn't just one material that was used. As with all traditional materials, people used what was close by. They didn't want to transport it long distances. They wanted it to be cheap and convenient, but also to perform well. So as with other materials, thatch buildings were no different.

They were using materials that were close to hand. So that could have been cultivated materials, like cereal crops, barley, oats, rye, all sorts of things, and wheat, and it might have been wild materials like marram grass or heather or broom or bracken, juniper, seaweed, all sorts of materials. So the range of materials that were used on roofs in Scotland is massive, but all of that has kind of been reduced down nowadays because agricultural farming has changed so much, because our social structures have changed so much. The way that people gather those materials and use them has changed over time. So now the range of materials used for roofs is very different because all of that social and agricultural infrastructure has changed and that's influenced now what we see on roofs.

So a lot of the time what drives it is both convenience, you know, thatchers and owners understandably want commercially available sources of these materials because our society isn't set up any more to gather lots of those materials. And it's not typically crofters that own many of these buildings. So you see a much smaller variety of materials used now.

And the Blackhouse is really interesting because this is roofed with oat straw and it's laid in a really particular way. So if you think about typical thatched buildings, think about buildings that you'd see in England or across, say, the Highlands of Scotland, the thatching material is laid in what's called a directional way, so you'd get a bunch of stuff and you'd lay it in all going in the same direction. Whereas here it is sprinkled willy-nilly and compressed and effectively the shape of the roof that you see is shaped by the body of the thatcher, so

there's a direct link with the human that's put the material on the roof. But what's really interesting is that they get the straw and they sprinkle it in a non-directional way and they compress it. And then they use nets and ropes to hold it in place.

Again, it's fascinating, the variety, not even in the materials, but even in how they were harvested. Some people would pull crops, they'd pull cereal crops or they'd pull heather or pull bracken. But in other areas, you know, maybe the next island over, they would be chopping the crops and that would influence how they used the material. And of course, you can then find evidence of that.

Traditionally, when straw was harvested, it would have been harvested by hand or it would have been harvested using traditional machinery like reaper-binders, which keep the stems straight and undamaged. So you would have big, long, straight stems. And also the traditional strains of cereal crops traditionally were much taller. The types of cereal crops that are grown nowadays are quite different to ones that were traditionally grown. So traditionally they were very tall. So if you got your timing wrong or you got bad weather, your whole crop could be lodged. So basically it could have been blown over before they could harvest it.

Whereas species and strains of cereal crop nowadays tend to be much shorter. But that's bad when it comes to thatching because you kind of want, you want the length. Although even the evidence on that, again, some sources say they would have used, you know, bits for the grain, bits for bedding and bits for the roof.

The technology to harvest that material has also changed. So nowadays, it's combine harvesters that harvest all of this material and they basically scrunch it all up. So at the end of the day, you get a bale of straw with all of the stems scrunched up and broken. So you can't use that straw in the same way.

So yeah, the Blackhouse is really interesting. And the other thing that's quite special about this building is that it shows how you get regional variations in the shapes of buildings and how they deal with the weather. So if you look at a thatched building in the Western Isles, the roof profile is very different to a thatched building, say, on the outskirts of Edinburgh or in the Highlands. Because in the Western Isles, there is a lot of wind. There's not many trees. So the roof needs to be able to deal with that wind. So you get low, rounded roofs in the Western Isles because that helps to deflect the wind more effectively. And this round ridge and the round hips is very typical of the Western Isles.

Where if you go to the Highlands, for example, or Swanston Village, for example, outside Edinburgh, you get the typical kind of pitched roof, which is very different. And the materials that you use to create those roofs influences the character and the style that you see and

that's why being able to access these materials that are appropriate for your region is so important because it can be much more difficult for example to replicate that very distinctive rounded character of the roof.

Sarah:

Yeah, you very much see it on your way in.

Ali:

Yeah. if you don't use the right materials. But of course thatched roofs in Arnol and in other townships across all of the Western Isles and the Outer Hebrides and the Inner Hebrides, if you go back in time where roofs have been found that have big thick layers going back decades, it's like very rarely is it just one main thatching material, because things shifted, farming practice has changed, how well a harvest was in one year changed. So you find even in one roof, there can be lots of different materials used, from heather to rushes. These were all materials that would have been used around here as well. All sorts of materials.

Sarah:

So depending on when that roof was, what was going on in the farmland, around about the landscape, and would then change what was used in the thatch material.

Ali:

And those materials can tell you what was going on at the time. That roof was put on the building, you know, so it can give you information. And even the weeds within that roofing material, because you know you don't get something growing just on its own, particularly cereal crops. You would have had wildflowers and other things growing in amongst them. That can tell you, was it grown on peaty soil or wet soil? So that could even tell you maybe what area of the land it was harvested from.

Roofs like this very commonly were very cyclical, so where you had, for example, people keeping cattle, they very often grew cereal crops. They would use part of the cereal as fodder, they would put more on the roof and you can see how smoky it is in here, so this smoke would go up into the thatch. These roofs were designed so that the smoke would go

up and percolate up through the roof. They didn't have, the early ones, an example of a house like this one, doesn't have a chimney. So I think this is one of the last surviving blackhouses with no chimney and it's pretty smoky. So it would percolate up through the straw, but that would basically make the straw perfect for use to fertilise the fields. So they would take that straw, not on every house, but on some, this was how they did it. They would remove some of that straw and use it on the fields.

Sarah:

So everything was getting recycled, reused. So it was taken from land, used for the roof, and then it would be taken from the roof and used back on the land and then replaced, obviously, with the new roof.

Ali:

And, of course, looking down the far end of this building, we can see into the byre, which, of course, wouldn't have been that clean at this time of year, probably, because there would have been cows and livestock living in there in the winter. And they would have, at the end of the season, when they were then letting the livestock out for the summer, in many cases with this type of house, they would dismantle that gable end. The whole gable end would come down and they'd knock a hole in it, to basically remove all of the soiled animal bedding. And that would be used as a fertiliser in the fields as well. So it was really kind of circular.

Sarah:

So, Ali, I was thinking when this first came into care, and obviously then the roofing and the thatching would have been, the whole structure would have been looked at. But I wonder then, how do you keep replicating or what is the process of either replicating as the roof would always have been or maybe potentially, I don't know, if it has to be adapted to the use of it now?

Ali:

So from the reading that I've done, I think there was pretty good evidence. So the roof on this building, I think it was still fairly intact. A part, I think in this byre here, part of it had slumped, but the roof timbers and everything, there was an awful lot survived already, so what you see now is really just a repair of what was here originally.

Sarah:

Oh that's brilliant, so all these timbers are pretty much as they were.

Ali:

Yes, as far as I'm aware, these are all original, and my understanding as well is that the roof covering, there was evidence of that particular kind of roof covering already, so that is again and they I know that they spoke to lots of locals who would have had local knowledge. So everything that's been done here is based on information that's been handed down from locals and through the generations. So this roof style is particular to here and to this local community. But even though that kind of non-directional straw is quite unusual, you do actually find instances of that in other countries on the continent. They use a similar technique as well. So there clearly, there definitely is precedent for it.

Very often people kind of dismiss these type of buildings as, you know, primitive, but actually they were quite sophisticated. They were very adapted to the weather and quite often ventilation, if you think about sharing this house all winter with livestock, they actually were thinking about ventilation. And quite often in buildings like this, they were designed in such a way that air would flow in a particular way through the building to ensure that you had kind of cleaner air and, you know, maybe ammonia and things would be carried out through the building.

Chapter 7

30:18

Sarah:

It's striking to think about how recently this way of life existed and how radically different it was to what you and I are used to today. The Blackhouse in Arnol seems some distant ancient relic, but it's really not. We're talking about living memory.

When we exited the Blackhouse, the smell of the peat fire lingered in my clothes and hair for the rest of the day. But my memory of it has lingered much longer. This was a way of living closely with the land, where people, animals, weather and work were all part of the same rhythm. And that's what stayed with me the most. Not just how people survived here, but how deeply connected they were to everything around them. In a place like this, the past is quite literally close enough to touch.

This has been the Historic Scotland podcast.

It was produced and edited by Adam Stoner. I'm Sarah MacGillivray.

Next time, we leave the intimacy of the Blackhouse and head south to the vastness of Calanais.

Set against the wide Atlantic sky, these stones have stood here for thousands of years. But who built them? And why? And what have they come to represent? See you then.

Chapter 8

31:57

Adam:

Hey, it's Adam, producer of the Historic Scotland podcast here. Thank you so much for listening to another episode, this time recorded at the Blackhouse in Arnol on the Isle of Lewis. Sarah, what did you make of it?

Sarah:

It was so atmospheric here. And what really struck me was that vastness, and it was very windy. You've got this Atlantic gale sweeping in, but as soon as you went in the Blackhouse, the wind stopped. And you just thought, yes. Over, I don't know how many hundreds of

years, people had built up this perfect house for surviving on the Outer Hebrides. It was so cosy, and the wind stopped as soon as you stepped inside. I mean it was genius; I loved it.

I also loved that the fire was the centre of the home and Marlene was so wonderful at evoking the sense of community and family and everyone gathering round and hearing stories, telling stories and eating together by that fire. I mean... and then when she taught us about the different peat levels as well, I just thought it was wonderful. I love the smell of peat. It was very strong and then our clothes and hair did smell of it, but it was so worth it because it's amazing and I think it's a lovely earthy smell. It also reminds me of like a peaty whisky, so I quite enjoy a peaty whisky so that was nice.

But yeah, it was really interesting and then when she told us about the woman who had lived there and then left there and it got handed over straight away you know for the care of, I think it was Historic Scotland at the time, but it was like we've said in the episode, that living memory. She stepped out. That was it. On to pastures new. And it was just left as it was. And there's something so connected to the land and earth of that place. And something so vital about just how connected to the landscape is. And it was so perfectly formed at that time for living on the Isle of Lewis. It was great. Loved it.

What did you think about the Blackhouse? Did you enjoy being there? How was your experience? Because I mean, we did this together. You were in there with me, speaking and listening with Marlene and with Ali. I mean, what was your experience of it?

Adam:

Yeah, I mean, the Blackhouse is such an incredible location. The very first thing that you are met with when you walk in is thick smoke. And the way that the sun kind of pierces through it. It's just gorgeous. It's like a photograph.

Obviously, you end up smelling of bonfire. We recorded this episode over two days. We were with Marlene on the first day and then with Ali on the second day. And on day two was also the day that we were flying home. So we were at the Blackhouse in the afternoon. And then, I'm really sorry, Loganair, probably stank out your aircraft, because all of us were flying back that day and we had all spent an hour sat beside the peat fire.

I think, you know, we've used the term primitive quite intentionally in the script to describe what the place feels like. And it does feel primitive. Ali kind of contradicts it and says it's not primitive in the way that it built. But it is a very different way of life. It's incredibly stripped back. And I mean, I loved the entire experience of getting to go there, meeting Marlene, who

is phenomenal. She's so funny and so charismatic and so charming. Yeah, I really enjoyed my time.

Thank you so much for listening to this episode. The final one comes in a fortnight. We are at the Standing Stones, which is just up the road for a story that is equal parts harrowing and charming, and I really hope you'll join us there.