

Dr Isabel Frances Grant

Founder of the Highland Folk Museum

Isabel Frances Grant was born in Edinburgh on July 21, 1887. Well versed in Scottish history and Highland folk culture, Grant wrote her first book "Everyday Life of an Old Highland Farm" (Longmans, London,) in 1924, based upon the eighteenth century account books of a distant ancestor, William Mackintosh of Balespick, near Kingussie.



Isabel Grant at Iona

Travelling through Europe Isabel Grant was profoundly influenced by the open air museum movement. Particularly she was by "Skansen", Stockholm, Sweden, Europe's first open air museum founded by Artur Hazelius in 1891 and by "Maihaugen", Lillehammer, Norway where she saw "activities" and not just objects being preserved. At these Museums, artifacts of everyday life were and are interpreted in a "living history" context within both structures and their immediate environments. Grant determined in 1934 to follow by establishing a Highland folk museum so that *"the old setting of our daily life be saved"*.

Grant further resolved, using her own resources, to record as much as she could of the then quickly disappearing long-established ways of Highland life and to preserve many of the associated and especially locally made objects. For the latter she often persuaded potential donors with the offer of "modern" goods in exchange before transporting them away in her "Morris 8" car. Grant accumulated a wide range of both domestic and rural artifacts from chairs to "cromans" and pots to ploughs. However, her foresight also meant that many, even at that time very rare, artifacts made of organic materials (horn, leather, wood, heather, straw) were preserved *as shown left*.



To accommodate her growing collection, Grant bought first in 1935 a disused church on the island of Iona. She called the museum "*Am Fasgadh*" (Gaelic: The Shelter") because *"it was to shelter homely ancient things from destruction"*. Within three years the Iona building was "*choc-a-bloc*" and so in 1939 Grant temporarily relocated "*Am Fasgadh*" to another church at Laggan twelve miles from Kingussie.

Grant's vision, however, was always for a larger site on which she could have fully interpreted, recreated or relocated structures. This she achieved when in 1943 she *"found and bought the present home of the collection"* "Pitmain Lodge", Kingussie, with *"three acres of ground for the erection of cottages"*. Within the Lodge artifacts from her collection were displayed both in associated groups and in open "room" settings. Not all artifacts were of local or craft manufacture for Grant was keen to reflect that an exhibition *"that did not show some of the things habitually imported into the Highlands would be misleading and suggest that we lived within barbarous isolation"*.

Within the grounds Grant used both existing and created new structures as settings for her collection to interpret Highland life. The remains of the Lodge's stable and coach house were used for agricultural implements and a dairy. The first cottage Grant built was *"a reconstruction of the type characteristic of Inverness-shire"*. The second reconstructed building, Grant's *"Lewis Cottage"*, the Blackhouse, was constructed *"under the close personal direction of a frail old man from Lewis"*. Other buildings followed. A Norse or "clack" mill incorporating workings that Grant bought from Bac, Lewis for the sum of £5. Then a third cottage, *"a mason-built but-and-ben"* was constructed. Today, the Blackhouse, the principal surviving building has become the icon for the Museum.

The Highland Folk Museum or *"new Am Fasgadh"*, Kingussie opened on June 1, 1944. The interpretation was completed along with cattle, sheep and goats. Today the Museum is acknowledged as Britain's first open air museum being almost ten years ahead of any others. In recognition of her pioneering efforts, Isabel Grant had conferred upon her by the University of Edinburgh the Honorary Degree of Doctor of Letters on July 2, 1948.

In parallel to her collecting activities, Grant continued writing and publishing. This culminated with what is considered by many to be her seminal volume "Highland Folk Ways" (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1961) in which she detailed both the non-material and material culture of the Highlands, primarily illustrating the latter using the collections she had established herself. "Highland Folk Ways" is still in print today.

In 1954 Isabel Grant retired from active daily involvement in the Museum. By agreement with the Pilgrim Trust, the Museum and its collections were purchased and subsequently handed over to a joint management board formed by the four ancient Scottish Universities of St. Andrew's, Aberdeen, Edinburgh and Glasgow. The first Curator then appointed was George "Taffy" Davidson who remained in post until 1974. At this time the future of *"Am Fasgadh"* was in doubt. However, thanks to the perseverance of volunteers such as Mrs Lois Vaughan and others, the Museum was kept going until it was taken over by the Highland Regional Council in 1975. From 1976 the Museum was managed by its second Curator, R. Ross Noble who retired in January 2003.

Awarded the MBE in 1959, Isabel Grant maintained an active interest in the Museum to the end. In 1983 she died in Edinburgh, aged 96, aware and supportive that active steps were being taken to take her original open air museum vision further with the acquisition and development of the current 32 hectare Highland Folk Museum site at Newtonmore.



Live interpretation at Am Fasgadh's "Inverness-shire Cottage" 1940s

Bob Powell, Curator, HFM, May 2004