Aidan O’Rourke / Imprint / Abandon / 2014 - 2015
Project Report
Aidan O'Rourke

PROJECT REPORT

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1. Introduction

Musician and composer Aidan O’Rourke joined Deveron Arts during the winter of 2014 to create a new suite of music inspired by abandoned human settlements in North East Aberdeenshire. His project *Imprint / Abandon* explored issues of landownership and access from Neolithic times till now. Focusing on the many abandoned settlements in the area, he spent time walking with historians, archaeologists and local enthusiasts to gain a better understanding of the local significance. Enriched by these experiences, Aidan composed music in response to the landscape and its socio-political history, assembling a world-class band of musicians/composers to further these ideas and make a recording of these musical meditations. Aidan proposed to develop a suite of music inspired by the human traces left in the landscape from Neolithic times until now. In particular, motivated by current debates around land reform, trying to reflect on the issues that might have led people to abandon those sites, investigating the imprints left behind.

The major output of this project was the album *Imprint*, a suite of five pieces of music relating to specific locations in The Cabrach and Rhynie area, including Wallakirk, Cabrach School and the Bracklach. The album was launched with Imprint / Abandon: Musical Tour, which took a group on a bus and walking tour of three of these sites. At each location Aidan gave a live performance of the track and local historian Ron Brander presented information about the area. The event was followed by a discussion on land use at the Acorn Community Centre, Cabrach. The project also created a legacy in the landscape with five geocaches that contain links to download a track from the CD, concealed at the different sites.
Aidan O'Rourke

Aidan O'Rourke is a Scottish fiddler with Irish ancestry, who grew up in the highland port of Oban before his family settled on the Island of Seil.

With a warm lyrical fiddle style and “unfailingly strong and imaginative” compositions, Aidan stands at the centre of the modern Scottish folk music revival. His musical activity is united by his deep fascination with Scottish culture, landscape and territory.

Growing up with traditional Irish music, played at home by his father, Aidan began formal training on the fiddle at the age of eight. He is best known for the folk trio Lau who formed in 2005, and have won ‘Best Group’ in the BBC Radio 2 Folk Awards four times since 2008. Aidan was also part of Blazin’ Fiddles and Kan, and has recorded and released three solo albums. He has gained recognition as a composer with high profile commissions for Celtic Connections festival and the Sage Gateshead, and was named Composer of the Year at the Scots Traditional Music Awards, 2011.

Aidan also runs workshops for musicians and composers, founding the fiddle camp Blazin’ in Beauly, tutoring at various folk festivals and running fiddle tuition days alongside his international tours. He was also selected to give a number of ‘composer surgeries’ at the South Bank Centre for aspiring young composers as part of the London 2012 Cultural Olympiad.

In February 2014 he was named ‘Musician of the Year’ at the BBC Radio 2 Folk Awards.
3. The Project

“The end of the human race will be that it will eventually die of civilisation...”
Ralph Waldo Emerson

Proposal

Aidan has always been fascinated with ruins. Growing up in rural Argyll he spent a lot of his youth exploring the area, “I was very fond of wandering and discovering abandoned shielings and crofts, it’s something that’s always been with me”. Human legacies in the landscape tap into a part of his imagination, with questions / speculation of how and why they have come to be, regardless whether they are 20 or 10,000 years old. This project was an opportunity for Aidan to engage with some of these questions through his music.

Aware of the numerous Pictish and Neolithic sites that have been discovered across Aberdeenshire — an area with a large number of stone circles — Aidan’s initial proposal was to write music in response to time spent walking amongst the many Neolithic sites close to Huntly. Upon arriving in Huntly, however, the focus of the proposal shifted to reflect current debates surrounding land reform in Scotland; instead seeking to connect the abandoned sites of Neolithic/Pictish times with those in our modern age. Aidan chose the name *Imprint / Abandon* to give to the project, indicative of the traces left in the landscape as people have moved through it.
The land around Huntly has been home to an ever-shifting community of dwellers for almost 10,000 years, each leaving their own mark in the landscape, some more profound than others. Communities have moved on for political reasons, for safety or to better climates where food production and cattle raising was easier. Sadly there have always been people seeking asylum or exile, while people also move on to find new employment, better education or new experiences. War has taken its toll on the land around us, from the Wars of Scottish Independence in the 14th century to the World Wars of the 20th. Many communities were forced to leave their land through the Clearances that began in the 18th century and this has continued in a more muted fashion until present day. Small traces of these abandoned settlements can be found across the land.

The Aberdeenshire landscape is often overlooked, particularly the Strathbogie valley in which Aidan concentrated his research, yet hidden amongst the farmland, moors and woodlands are numerous Neolithic and Pictish sites: standing stone circles, of which many are complete. Their scale, in comparison with larger sites found further south, has meant that for most people these sites lie undiscovered, yet the landscape here has a rich history to tell when we begin to peel back the layers. Recent excavations in the area, in particular in Rhynie, have begun to discover evidence of a sophisticated society based on trading with places all over the world. When one begins to look hard enough the imprints of these people have been left across the landscape.

The Strathbogie and Deveron valley is an area which Deveron Arts has been exploring through the programme *Hielan’ Ways*: an interpretation of a local name by historian Ron Brander to describe a rough area that stretches the triangle from Huntly to Braemar and Tomintoul, inclusive of the Cabrach estate. This area was once demarcated by a network of ancient lifelines — drovers’ routes and pathways — connecting the communities of the Upper Deveron with the glens of Strathdon, the Spey and beyond. An area now largely empty of any human dwelling or activity, its heritage and significance is in danger of being lost as land use changes. The *Hielan’ Ways* project was an attempt to find ways to re-engage with the areas past and what possibilities and potentials lie undiscovered in this remote landscape.

Within the *Hielan’ Ways* territory, an area known as the Cabrach in particular captivated Aidan’s imagination. It is an alluring landscape with a fascinating history; its management over time has created a stark landscape littered with many tumbledown crofts, empty schools and churches. Much of this was caused by the huge proportion of young men who went to war in 1914 and didn’t return and so some refer to the Cabrach as Europe’s largest memorial to the First World War. Aidan comments on the area, “[t]he place is dotted with abandoned crofts and schools, but there is also, in a more muted way, a modern-day clearance, with certain landlords simply not making it easy for tenant farmers to renew their leases. So we decided it would be interesting to look at how over thousands of years we’ve left our mark on the land around Huntly and how we’ve moved on, for whatever reasons.”
Shortly before Aidan’s visit to Huntly, activist and writer Andy Wightman delivered a talk in Glenbuchat — a small village within the *Hielan’ Ways* — on the history of land ownership/reform in Scotland. This was a significant event, in run up to a land reform bill being announced by the Scottish Government, and one that attracted a large turn out for an area with a relatively small population. Although himself not in attendance, this event would influence the direction of Aidan’s project, as he sensed an important opportunity to connect the areas past with any potential futures being discussed.

**Research**

Aidan arrived in Huntly towards the end of 2014 and spread his residency out over the next year — due to a musician’s busy schedule Aidan came for a couple weeks at a time. Researching over winter, recording in spring, editing and mixing in the summer and the final launch event held at the end of 2015.

Over the first couple of months he spent many days out walking with local artists, farmers, archaeologists and historians, visiting abandoned dwellings and sites of significance to gather ideas and experiences of place that would go on to inform his writings. In the evenings, Aidan would translate the days experience into writings and short recordings.

Aidan began by visiting a number of Pictish sites close to Huntly with archaeologist Gordon Noble, who had been conducting digs in Rhynie during the summer. These sites included the Craw Stane, the North Wheedlemont Stones and the Upper Ord Circle, all by Rhynie. Local historian Ron Brander played a key role in Aidan’s research, taking him to visit many of the abandoned sites in the Cabrach and passing on some of his knowledge of the area’s history — much of this has been collected in Ron’s book *Ower the Hills tae Huntly*. Many of these sites would feature in the *From this Land* tour
(see below). Artist Gill Russell, who has walked the area extensively, also took Aidan out to explore the landscape and visit sites that for her constitute significant places; sheilings, watercourses and ancient paths, to name a few. Aidan also met with people still living in the Cabrach, in particular Maureen and David Sheed, and their son Neil, who have been farming in the area for decades. Through discussion with the Sheeds, Aidan was able to gain a better picture of what life is like in the Cabrach now and how this has changed over the last few decades — a recording of this discussion forms the intro to one of the tracks on the CD.

While in Huntly, Aidan also met with the Huntly Folk Club and the Strathspey Fiddlers, taking part in their monthly meet ups, sharing traditional music and techniques.

Aidan was also keen for the project to explore the language of the area, in an attempt to better understand the landscape. Working with local Doric speakers Steve Brown and John Gordon — also a retired farmer from the Cabrach — an event was set up to explore the language of the North East. A similar event was also set up looking at the Gaelic language and place names.

**Production Process**

In Spring 2015 Aidan assembled a group of musicians to help him further his initial ideas and to develop them into complete pieces of music. They took over a cottage outside Huntly — at the edge of the Glass/Cabrach area belonging to retired forester Steve Brown — to make the recordings. They also had the opportunity to visit some of the sites Aidan had been exploring, and meet the Rhynie Woman.

Five tracks were recorded during this session, which were then edited and mixed over the summer by Aidan in Edinburgh.

Session musicians:
Aidan O’Rourke — Fiddle/Electronics
John Blease — Drums
Anna Meredith — Electronics
Tom Rogerson — Piano/Keyboards
Stuart Hamilton — Recording Engineer

**4. Events and Outreach**

A number of events ran throughout Aidan’s residency that gave people the chance to engage with the topics of his residency: talks, discussions and walks in and around Huntly.
**Huntly Folk Night with Aidan O’Rourke**
17 December, Ex Servicemen’s Club, Huntly
Aidan joined the local Huntly folk night for a one off session to share traditional songs and stories. Aidan led this event and performed a short concert after the other performers.

**Aidan O’Rourke at Strathspey Fiddle Club**
February 2015, Huntly Football Club
Aidan joined Strathspey Fiddle Club for an evening, sharing tunes and experiences and meeting local people who shared his enthusiasm for fiddle music.

**Ancient Rhynie with Aidan O’Rourke and Gordon Noble: Walk, talk and music**
21 February 2015, Rhynie
Aidan O’Rourke and Archaeologist Gordon Noble led a walk around the ancient Neolithic and Pictish sites close to Rhynie. Aidan started the day by playing a quick tune in the centre of Rhynie before leading a group to the top of Tap o’ Noth. Gordon gave historical and archaeological accounts of the Tap o’ Noth fort, before leading the group to visit standing stones in the town and graveyard, and on to the Craw Stane.

In the evening, at the Gordon Arms Hotel in Rhynie, Aidan and Gordon had a public discussion which investigated land use from ancient to contemporary times through musical interpretation, complimented by showing photos taken throughout the day.

Aidan gave a short concert before a warming buffet from Rhynie Woman. Local musicians had been invited to this event to then jam with Aidan and played a ceilidh for participants to dance to.

**Gaelic Pronunciation and Div ye ken ony Doric?**
15 September and 4 November 2015, Crown Bar, Huntly
Following research into Pictish history, right up until the present day, through the Imprint/Abandon project, an interest in the changing stages of language was identified. Gaelic Pronunciation was led by native Gaelic speaker, Mary Burgerhout, and attracted a large group of people interested in learning more about reading and speaking Gaelic. Div ye ken ony Doric? was an evening exploring the history and language of North East Scotland, led by Steve Brown. Participants were invited to bring Doric texts, and ask questions about the past and future of the language.

5. Main Event: From this Land - Imprint / Abandon Musical Tour
Imprint / Abandon culminated in the five track EP *Imprint*, which was launched on 5 December with a musical tour of some of the sites that inspired the music. A coach transported a group of around 30 people to different areas in the Cabrach, just outside Huntly, and Aidan debuted some of his new tracks in the landscape. Imprint/Abandon: Musical Tour was part of *From this Land*, a double launch day event where Rhynie Woman launched their new cook book *Cooking the Landscape* in the morning at the Farmers’ Market, and Aidan launched his album in the afternoon.

The visits in each site followed a similar format; local historian Ron Brander gave historic context to the place and Aidan played the track that corresponded to the site, first as a live solo and then playing the album version on a cd player. The layers of instrumentation on the album track contrasted to the stripped back quality of the live performances giving the audience two different experiences of the track.
After testing the route prior to the event, and scheduling the day’s stopping points, maps were created (ordnancesurvey.co.uk) for each participant on the walk. A timetable was also drawn up, informing participants of stops and track listings.

This first stop on the Tour was the track Wolf Monk. Aidan was inspired to write this, based on his visits and research into Wallakirk. This place still hosts a small cemetery, however, the kirk is no longer to be seen. Many Cabrach and Glass folk are buried here, including Principal Geddes of Aberdeen University and Lady Bridge, widow of Sir Frederick Bridge, organist of Westminster Abbey. St Wallach is thought to have died in 733, the church dating back to the 12th century. The name is derived from St Wallach, or Wollok, the first Bishop in the diocese. He is claimed to have lived a hermit-like life, but is also known for travelling, preaching and teaching. Running behind Wallakirk is St. Walloch’s Baths, running alongside the River Deveron.

The next track to be experienced was The Cabrach. The land of The Cabrach shows many tumbledown crofts, empty schools and churches, largely caused by the huge proportion of young men who went to war in 1914 and didn’t return. The imprints of an abandoned barn at Bracklach in the Cabrach led to Aidan’s writing of this track. Aidan led the Musical tour on an hour trail from the road to the barn and back again, playing a haunting rendition of the song in the darkened barn. Ron Brander also provided information about previous residents of The Cabrach, reading out recorded primary source accounts.

The light faded as we reached the final site, the old Cabrach School. Candles were lit to combat the darkness of the derelict interior, creating a different atmosphere. The sampling of interviews from the local Sheed family on the album track The Burn of the Shelter, added to this environment.

The day concluded with a discussion on Land Use: Past Present and Future, at the Acorn Community Centre, Lower Cabrach. This was chaired by Archaeologist Dr Gordon Noble who was joined by Access Manager for Moray, John MacKenzie, and Cabrach residents Neil Sheed and Jean Oliver. Discussion was followed by soup and homemade Rhynie sourdough made by Rhynie Woman. Participants relaxed to a short concert from Aidan and former Blazin Fiddles guitarist Marc Clement.

Throughout the Tour, Deveron Arts staff placed five Geocaches, including a downloadable track link, at their respective sites. These Geocaches are intended to make up a map of the Imprint/Abandon.
project and future explorers will be encouraged to collect all of the tracks, experiencing the sites of their inspiration as they do so.

6. Marketing

Print
- 3 x Printed newsletter, 1000 copies
- Edition of 10 posters per event distributed locally

Digital
- Social Media campaign on Facebook (+1800 followers) and Twitter (+1700 followers)
- 6 x email newsletter to + 1600 subscribers
- Events and news listing on our website

7. Impact

Attendance Numbers
Groups and individuals that we worked with over the course of the project:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Events 2014-15</th>
<th>Events</th>
<th>Participants</th>
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<tr>
<td>Folk Music Session</td>
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<tr>
<td>Masterclass</td>
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<td>15</td>
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<tr>
<td>Masterclass Strathbogie fiddlers</td>
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<td>Ancient Rhynie</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gaelic Pronunciation</td>
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<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Div ye ken the Doric</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From this Land</td>
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<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
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8. Media

Press Coverage

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<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Media Appearance</th>
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<tr>
<td>02/01/15</td>
<td>The Huntly Express</td>
<td>Deveron stint for folk award Winner</td>
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<td>19/02/15</td>
<td>The Press and Journal</td>
<td>Aidan O’Rourke</td>
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<td>26/11/15</td>
<td>The Press and Journal</td>
<td><strong>Q&amp;A with Aidan O’Rourke</strong></td>
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<td>27/11/15</td>
<td>The Huntly Express</td>
<td>Arts body to launch two 'exciting' new events</td>
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<td>04/12/15</td>
<td>The Scotsman</td>
<td><strong>Lament for a Lost World</strong></td>
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<td>01/01/16</td>
<td>Knock News</td>
<td>Music: Imprint/Abandon CD by Aidan O’Rourke</td>
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9. Reflection

The project set out to develop a new suite of music that was inspired by the history of human activity in the land around Huntly and the imprints left behind as people have abandoned their settlements in the area. It is an area with a deep history that unfortunately is little known to the rest of Scotland, but thanks to recent work by a number of individuals and organisations who have begun to uncover traces of significant places central to early settlers of the land, this is beginning to change: A Pictish kingdom trading with the rest of the world with Rhynie at its centre; a dense network of stone circles littered across the landscape; a web of ancient paths connecting the north and the south. Imprint/Abandon was an attempt to explore this history through music, to create a different way for people to engage with this landscape and bring it to their attention. Particularly at a time when land reform was high on the agenda, it seemed timely to develop a project that attempted to explore issues of landownership and use, reflecting back from now to Neolithic times. This was an ambitious proposal and Aidan’s project was only able to scratch the surface of what is a relatively long period in human history and one that is deeply complex.

Nonetheless, Aidan’s project created a number of opportunities for people to explore the history of the area and how this has impacted the landscape we see today. For example, the Ancient Rhynie walk with archaeologist Gordon Noble was very successful in engaging people with the area’s history in a very tangible way; walking, talking and listening to pieces of music amongst many significant sites around Rhynie. The launch event of the CD was also very successful and worked in a similar way, taking people out into the landscape and combining historical insight with musical performance — replaying the pieces of music written about each specific place back to them. The following discussion held at the Acorn centre allowed us to connect Aidan’s music with contemporary debates on land use in the area — through discussing past, present and future perspectives on land use. This was important and gave the CD launch a sense of context, from musical meditation to the real issues of land reform.

The IMPRINT CD demands a new level of engagement with a history and landscape almost forgotten in Aberdeenshire. Through these pieces of music, Aidan did not set out to answer any specific questions or make an overtly political statement but rather to keep the space of conversation open; leaving room for the mind to roam and emphasising the importance of listening, deeply.
“A magical environment: the Cabrach, Strathbogie and Strathdeveron valleys. Uncovering places that were central to earlier settlers of the land — crofters, the Picts and the nameless peoples of deeper prehistory. This music is inseparable from the flows of landscape change and the fusion of history and place.”

Gordon Noble – University of Aberdeen


IMPRINT is a five track EP written and recorded on location in Huntly and the surrounding area. A blend of traditional folk and more experimental electronic music, the tracks are the result of Aidan’s experiences of walking in the landscape in attempt to better understand the issues of landownership and access that have shaped human settlements from Neolithic times till now.

11. Funding and Thanks

Artist
Aidan O’Rourke

Media
Leslie Booth

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