

Final report on Huntly branding project (Room to Roam)

Jacques Coetzer

February – July 2008

February – March.

Gathering impressions by engaging with the community:

In early February I arrive with my family and settle into Huntly town life. I am introduced to Claudia Zeiske, director of Deveron Arts, Donald Boyd, Huntly town coordinator and members of the Aberdeenshire Towns Partnership, as well as Sheila Waterhouse of the Aberdeenshire Council Arts Development . I embark on a schedule of one-on-one meetings with some key figures in the town in order to gather views of the town's identity: Hilda Lumsden-Gill of the Huntly Community Council, Douglas Forrest (architect), Ron Brander (Ramblers club), Bill Dean (Deans's shortbread factory), Kevin Shand (RB Farquhar), Euan Shand (Whiskies of Scotland), Roy Young (Nordic ski tutor), Pat Scott (Huntly Express), Moira Ingleby (Conservative Party representative), Joanna Strathdee (Scottish National Party representative), Fiona Manson (Huntly Tourist Association), Anne Hyslop (Gordon Primary), David Sherriffs (Huntly Business Association), Patrick Scott (Historian), Philip Morrison (Rizza's Ices) and Malcolm Bruce (Liberal Democrat Party representative). My family and I receive a welcoming letter from Mr. Alex Salmond, Scottish first minister. An article that explains the principles of the branding project is published in the Huntly Express and prompts members of public to introduce themselves to me and my family and share their views and ideas about the town's identity. Casual conversations at various social functions and interaction at the school, where our children are involved, shine some light on people's opinions about the town's multiple identities.

Initial conclusions:

After serious consideration of all the information gathered, it becomes evident that the old branding, (*The Family Town*) seems to be partly apt, because Huntly offers good infrastructure for families (like my own). Most people interviewed however feel that the *Family Town* identity is not entirely representative or even find it restrictive.

It becomes apparent that Huntly's identity is one of diversity, consisting of a number of facets (nodes), of which *The Family Town* is only one element. The town is also traditionally a market town, connected to the network of smaller villages that lie in the district around it. I develop the node model into a visual theme, which leads to the deer's antler as collective symbol for these diverse elements.

I also identify two main themes:

Old Huntly, with a rich cultural history and impressive architecture like the buildings on the town square, Gordon Schools and Huntly Castle. The significant value of the literary work of George Macdonald, Huntly poet of the 1800's is a part of the town's identity which has the potential to be explored more and marketed more extensively.

New Huntly, as seen from the A96 motorway, with the giant ASDA and TESCO supermarkets as first visual impressions of the town. Also the significance of the local industries in the economic life of the town. The establishment of new businesses and shops on and around the town square are key to healthy development.

The rural setting and the Scottish principle of free access to the land for everyone (*Right to roam*) is a significant part of the “soul” of the town. Huntly is ideally positioned to attract city-dwellers who wish to escape to a country lifestyle and yet have the comforts of a good town infrastructure.

Music and poetry stand out as a strong part of local social life and is represented at the writer’s club, folk evenings, ceilidhs, highland games and music events like the *Ronald Center Festival* and the annual *Entertainment on the Square*. In my research, I discover the link between Huntly poet, George MacDonald and The Waterboys, a contemporary folk- rock band. I establish contact with Mike Scott, lead singer and songwriter of the band and this leads me to the poem ***Room to Roam***, which was written by MacDonald in 1858 and put to music by Scott in 1990. The words of the poem are descriptive of Huntly’s rural setting, but also of a mental attitude, which allows for people to be individuals. There is also a thematic link to the idea of the *Diaspora*, a very common Scottish (and small-town Huntly) phenomenon.

I decide to develop this ***Room to Roam*** idea as main theme for the branding project and Mike Scott agrees to become involved by teaching town musicians the song as potential town anthem.

April– May

Establishing and refining the Room to Roam theme with the help of the community.

Anthem: After deciding on the theme for the branding, I give feedback to the community in numerous one-on-one conversations with townsfolk and by presenting the findings (as set out above) at a Community Council meeting, a Business Association meeting, an ATP meeting, a Saturday farmer’s market and by regularly publishing reports and outcomes in the Huntly Express, with the kind support of editor, Pat Scott. After the theme is endorsed by the ATP (who commissioned the branding project and largely steered it through Donald Boyd) and the other parties that were consulted, I go ahead and establish regular rehearsals (once every two weeks) in my artist’s studio (The old empty shop at the bottom of Bogie Street). These rehearsals are led by Mike Scott and is initially attended by a small number of singers and a band made up of the key instrumentalists to perform the song. Over the coming months the numbers grow to an outfit of 30 people from different age groups - some also from neighbouring villages. The rehearsal sessions become an opportunity to informally discuss the meaning and value of the Room to Roam concept and give me the opportunity to refine the identity.

Visual branding: I decide to, alongside the anthem, and in the light of the old/new theme identified earlier, develop a contemporary logo based on the antler theme, as well as design an updated version of the historic coat of arms which would display the antler (*tyne*, in heraldic terms) and the ***Room to Roam*** motto. Claudia and I approach Scottish heraldic expert, Charles Burnett (Ross Herald) in this regard and develop the coat of arms according to the correct guidelines of this age-old tradition. The implementation of the coat of arms largely relies on the follow-up and support of the Huntly Community Council. The visual designs are tested publically (at a farmer’s market presentation) and in various personal and group meetings before being refined to its final form.

Praktika: The *Room to Roam* branding concept is also presented and scrutinised at the Praktika sessions, a symposium on socially engaged art, organised in Huntly by Deveron Arts. Fifteen artists and an art critic and writer give their input and impressions of the project. This turns out to be a valuable critique, from another, more artistic angle.

June - July

Public performances of the town anthem, brand launch and roll-out.

On Sunday June the 1st 2008, *Room to Roam* is performed in public by the town band for the first time, at the annual *Entertainment on the Square* event. The local musicians play and sing alongside Mike Scott and fellow Waterboys member, Steve Wickham, who came from Ireland to attend the event. The show is also attended by Scottish first minister, Alex Salmond.

On June 25, the ***Room to Roam*** brand is officially launched at a public ceilidh in the Gordon Schools assembly hall. The song is sung twice, once by the band and the second time together with the audience of around 200 people. I give a visual presentation of the whole branding process and Mike Scott officially hands the song over to local musician, Keith Cockburn, who accepts the anthem on behalf of the Huntly community. Mike Scott and members of the town band perform solo numbers and a ceilidh dance version of *Room to Roam*, choreographed by Leán Coetzer and Steve Brown, is introduced and danced by members of the audience. Matt Donaldson undertakes to teach the dance steps to school pupils in future. *Room to Roam* merchandise like stickers, coffee mugs and T-shirts are made available to the public. The Huntly Express distributes a poster of the branding process to strengthen the launch. Local radio station, NECR, airs a live interview with me and BBC radio programme, Radio Café, plays the song and interviews me and Mike Scott. The *Press and Journal* and *The Scotsman* newspapers report on the event in very positive articles.

In July, the last month of the project, I prepare a number of visual suggestions as to the application of the logo in signage on the A96 and around the town and put up a website in support of the Room to Roam brand on www.huntly.net/roomtoroam

Conclusion.

I feel that the *Room to Roam* branding project was a success largely because of the creative vision of town coordinator Donald Boyd and the ATP, who asked Deveron Arts to select an artist to engage with the community in a meaningful way in the search for an apt brand for Huntly. Very importantly too, it was the financial backing of the sponsors that made this project possible. Claudia Zeiske's zest, insight and guidance and Deveron Arts' good track record was a major help to get the community to open up to me and my family in the whole process. This project will only grow to its full potential once the brand starts to become visible and is used in everyday Huntly life.

Thank you sincerely, on behalf of our family, for the wonderful opportunity to have been part of Huntly life for a few months. I do hope that the identity that we deciphered and shaped together will be of value for the community in times to come.



Jacques Coetzer
2008-10-01