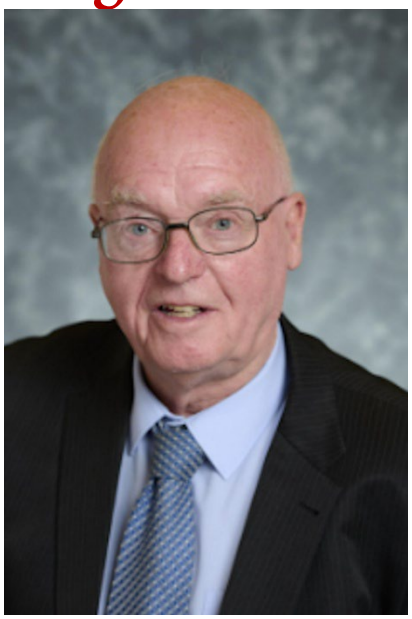
·DORNOCH·
HERITAGE·SOCIETY

'Embo Na Gort'
- hungry Embo

talk by Highland Councillor



Jim McGillivray
16th October 2008

Well, thank you very much for the opportunity to speak to you tonight. It's very seldom a humble man gets the opportunity to speak to such a distinguished and extended audience in Dornoch, except perhaps as the accused awaiting sentence. And I feel very much like that just now, and like all good accused, I've broken out my best Matalan suit for the occasion.

I am no historian, and as such I feel no compulsion whatsoever to adhere to recorded facts. And so, unhampered by historical truth, what is going to ensue is very much my own personal perception of events as I have been told them, experienced them, read them and now understand them. And I've drawn my theme from the terms of minor deprecation and abrasion which still exist between East Sutherland villages, which you now can still explain, but still are there palpably in the folk memory.

And just by way of starting, I've put up a picture of Embo as I see it at the moment. And there are two things perhaps to draw to your attention in this modern perception here. First of all, the modern Embo has trees. In my day, in my younger day, the least sign of a leafy bough was an invitation to firewood. And I think we've come on a great deal in the last few years, so we can actually see a fairly leafy village in place. This is noticeable in the view of the bray leading into Embo, and does anybody know what that bray is actually called? Just a little bit of audience participation. It's called Cronk Hill. And we actually, as youngsters, accepted this idea of Cronk Hill. We know the Gaelic 'Cronk' is Hill, thus Cronk Hill is 'Hill, Hill' but we thought nothing about that. It is only when you dig a little bit deeper, as I think is very important to do in all these matters, that we found out it's actually 'Cronk, Cronkilia', which is the wooded hill, and refers to the great wood that extended up through to the Embo Muir before the First World War. As I go through, I think I'll touch on a lot of things with which you're very well familiar being a historical society. I'll try to put my own interpretation on events as best I can.

Observable origins of the village of Embo seem to date back to Bronze Age times. As can be ascertained from the stone monuments in front of the bar at Grannie's Heilan Hame. Over a lot of years, there have been many strange things seen in front of the bar at Grannie's I'm quite sure but little did we think in our younger days, in the early 60s, when we actually sledged down the hill and rolled our Easter eggs that we were standing and playing over irreverently on the bones of some of the original inhabitants of the area. It was only when excavations took place to install the petrol tanks at the caravan site, that this hidden burial place was uncovered.

Embo Chambered Cairn Historylinks Cat. No. 2011_090_01

Two Bronze Age beaker graves are on this site but not visible in the photograph

As far as I am aware, there's little else apart from these stones to record the presence or customs of the inhabitants of this corner of East Sutherland. And I often wonder, what took them here? It must have been a fairly barren area. What did they live on? How did they survive? If you look at the size of the stones, and the way in which they're arranged, it takes more than a hunter-gatherer kind of existence to put these stones together into a lasting monument. The question is, was there a permanent settlement here, rather than just simply a burial ground? If so, where it was, and perhaps there's a great deal still to be uncovered

about that era and time. A lot of Embo history has really slipped under the radar of recorded events.

Sir Robert Gordon had a vantage point of the early 17th century, and he describes the Battle of Embo against, as you're well aware, a marauding force of Danes or Norwegians in 1259. And he records this as being a cruel battle against them at a place called Embo, between the town of Dornoch and the ferry of Unas, or Innes's Ferry. Though this battle is long since been appropriated by our neighbours here in Dornoch as the Battle of Bear's Cross, what a friend gets is no loss.

I come across this part of the country regularly. I jog along or stagger along the old railway track on a regular basis to try and keep fitting into my clothes. When you look at it, quite what they expected is a puzzle. If I was a 13th century Viking, I wouldn't really be heading here.

Quite what they expected to gain in any material sense from arriving on a forlorn piece of coastline is really very questionable, and I don't think we record the battle without actually investigating why they're there. The peak of Norse influence in this area was around 900 AD to 1200 AD, so it's perhaps an awareness of their declining powers which invoked this mission, in an attempt to re-establish their strategic position in this part of the world. It perhaps also is one of these social and convivial things that the Viking element at the time felt obliged to do.

I rather feel they made a substantial mistake in where they were. If we actually look at the Littleferry and imagine that they're landing there on a flow tide, because you can't really come in against the tide at Littleferry, they would observe the very imposing Skelbo Castle and surely be aware of the strategic proximity of Dornoch. They could not really have thought that their intended pillage was going to roll through without some kind of severe challenge.

Perhaps as they scouted around for some kind of nourishment, water supply and so on, they would recognise that this is a fairly inhospitable landscape. From my personal perspective, I think they arrived here quite by accident and were on their way to a more profitable pillage in Easter Ross, and perhaps to solicit some interest from the local damsels in that area rather than in this corner. It was only a few years later, 1263, the Battle of Largs, and 1290, the death of Margaret, Maid of Norway, the child Queen of Scotland on her voyage across the North Sea to take up her throne, that the Viking issue was finally absorbed into history.

I've never been there, but I believe Princess Cairn is up there, which is actually the point from which the news came to the commissioners of the Scottish Government about the demise of the said Margaret. It's interesting that Gordon used the name Embo in his records, and it's very close to the modern equivalent, and in those days I'm quite sure there had been a very casual approach to the name. Some sources have recorded Ethnbol and Einbol, or Ivan's Barn, which shows the obvious Norse influence on the name, whilst others state Eiribol, East Village, which has Gaelic origins and is in fact the preferred modern Gaelic form of the settlement that we use today.

By my reckoning, there were no less than five main languages used in this area at that time, apart from the indigenous Gaelic and the even more indigenous Pictish, which must have prevailed to a certain extent. There's obviously the Norwegian dialect used by the Vikings,

and the clerics and administrators and bureaucrats of Dornoch would be proficient in Latin. Being transplanted or appointed from the south, may have used a little English of the lowlands of Scotland and perhaps some of the French of their Norman roots, so there would be a very mixed hodgepodge of dialects prevailing.

From my history, from the end of the 11th century onwards, the reign of Malcolm Canmore, the holders of the Scottish crown sought strategic advancement and the colonial control of the Highlands as a whole by promoting and imposing southern families of proven loyalty to positions of landed influence. These families had the strong Anglo-Saxon and subsequently Anglo-Norman connections, and brought with them their common language, the English we have today, and to an extent their feudalism.

This social restructuring continued into the time of the very Anglicised David I, who, as you're probably well aware, elevated the Presquins of Moray into the heirdom of Sutherland as instruments of the Scottish Crown in the 12th century, in a bid to reverse control from the influence north. It was the descendants of the original Presquins, who now called themselves the Moravia or Moray, who triumphed at the Battle of Embo, and possibly had some Embo troops in their squad. Over subsequent centuries they remained aloof and above the people, studiously, stubbornly and resolutely refusing to intermarry with the local population, but seeking their partners to advantage from lowland and English connections.

And if there indeed formed some nuptial alliances with the local Gaelic culture, who knows how the history might have changed in this county. A family policy has repercussions all the way through the history of this area with subsequent history or record of Embo in the next few centuries pertaining very much to Embo House, the modern version.

I sneaked in and caught a quick photograph when nobody was looking the other day. The main centre for Embo estate and the home for some considerable time of the Gordon family, who held possession from the end of the 16th century. And I think this branch of the Gordon family would seem to be closely related to the Sir Richard Gordon I mentioned earlier, who was an uncle and tutor to the young Earl of Sutherland at the time, and he was full of advice.

Embo House Historylinks Cat No. 2006_247

And in 1620, he advises his nephew very formally, use your diligence to take away the relics of the Irish barbarity which yet remain in your country. To it, the Irish language and the habit. Purge your country piece and piece from that uncivil kind of clothes, such as plates, mantles, trues and blue bonnets.

The Irish language cannot be so soon extinguished. There was a wee bit of ethnic cleansing by Sir Richard in the 17th century that might perhaps be considered quite acceptable in those days. And he wasn't alone. This destructive attitude to the indigenous language and culture of the area had official sanction from the central government by the 1496 Scottish Education

Act, and a crown pact with the heart of Guildham, the chieftains of the Hebridean clans, this pact being called the Statutes of Iona. And this was perpetuated in the century after Sir Robert's time by the Scottish Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge, who set up and administered many of the rural schools set up in the highlands at that time.

Really it is only in recent years that we have any kind of government support for the Gaelic language. And I've mentioned this perhaps towards the end of this talk. Alex Salmond's recent words are either too ambitious or too progressive, that there should be no limit to the ambition of the modern Gael. I think we have to look very carefully at the financial state of the economy before we can get carried away with that kind of attitude.

Referring again to Embo House, the original building would seem to have been destroyed by fire in the late 1700s. The existing and very imposing building, with its multiple wings, was constructed thereafter. And it was in the mid-19th century, 1835 I think, that it passed out of Gordon Hand's on the purchase by the second Duke of Sutherland. Though he never actually occupied it, it was occupied and administered by his factor, Captain Kenneth Mackay, who also occupied the farms at Torboll and Proncy. But so much of the history at this time refers to what we call Big Embo, the Embo House.

There is little mention of whatever peasants might have been eking out an existence on the shore. In this general era, there are a few things that struck me from the early 19th century. In this era, the year 1809, the Meikle Ferry disaster took place and this was very much a Dornoch issue. I mention this for a couple of reasons. One reason is very topical, some sources attribute the substantial crowd which attempted to cross the Dornoch Firth that day, for the failure of one or more of the Tain Banks. So they're obviously rushing in to see if they could get their money before there's any possibility of a government prop-up. And as is well known, the ferry foundered through overloading, and there was a considerable loss of life, including some unfortunate casualties from the village of Embo. A reference to this is made in the book by local author R. J. Mackay in his ‘History of Ancient Fishing Village’.

The Northern Times published the soft bound copy of the book for around 70 pence in 1972 or 73, but of the original hardback copies, there's one currently on the internet for £30 if anybody's interested. The hardback version is a full account whereas the Northern Times version was very much abridged. So with R. J. Mackay, Justice of the Peace as he was, means that there must have been agreement of some kind in the book title, and not just the central manorial building and estate referred to as Big Embo.

Further evidence in the old statistical account of 1793, the Parish Minister of Dornoch identifies that there's only one boat's crew of fishermen who are neither skilful nor adventurous. They are therefore wretchedly poor and of little or no advantage to the place. A rather scathing criticism, I feel, but I suppose he felt obliged to make his comments known.

Whether they were Dornoch fishermen or Embo fishermen, he doesn't actually explain too closely. This must have been a very formative time for Embo but, as I keep referring, there are a few written records which substantiate the history. There is, however, a heartening reference in the letters of Dornoch parish minister, Angus Kennedy, in 1821, and he says, on Monday, 24th September, I examined the Gaelic school at Embo taught by a Mr. Sutherland. There were present 20 boys and 21 girls, which makes for a sizable settlement. I presided at

the opening of the school, and it was truly an interesting sight to see so many parents coming with their children, eager to avail themselves of the opportunity to have their young ones taught to read the word of God in their native language. The number enrolled on the first day amounted to near 30, and the number continued to increase, till the fishing and harvest called the efficient heads away. But I anticipate a very crowded school for the winter session.

Now, today we call this wraparound childcare, and it would have been very greatly appreciated by the local women in Emb0 at that time. They would have thought, well, here's a chance to get the kids out of the way for a little while.

I cannot have any description of this part of the world without referring to the clearances. It is a commonly held truth, by me personally at least, that Embo is very much a clearance settlement. It was never really part of the main ownership of the Sutherland estate, and the clearances in the Embo area, although real and attributable, are not well documented in any of the available records, unlike the clearances further north. Principles were the same, but perpetrators were slightly different, and must rely to an extent on folk memory.

There's a reference by an R. J. Adam in his 1972 work entitled, 'Papers on Sutherland Estate Management, 1802-16' in which he relates that ten tenants, or households, were displaced by a farm created for in 1812 at Achavandra, inland from Dornoch. Nearby, in Balvraid, three farms were established, and fifteen tenants – these were actual households – were displaced. From my own personal perspective, when asked where her family had come from, my late mother-in-law was quite adamant that they had been subject to clearance from this area here, on the Achavandra-Balvraid side, and arrived subsequently in Embo. So it's the nearest I can get to folk memory that I can actually vouch for.

Continuing on the clearance vein, James Loch, the apologist for the House of Stafford, amongst other things, tried to justify the clearance policy in his words of 1820, and there's a lot of truth in what he says. The mountains of Sutherland were as much calculated for the maintenance of stock as they were unfit for the habitation of man. There could be no doubt of the propriety of converting them into sheep walks, provided the people could at the same time be settled in situations whereby with the exercise of an honest industry they could attain a decent livelihood and add to the general mass of national wealth. In fairness, the Stafford family did indeed fund considerable works to construct generally adequate harbours at Helmsdale, Portgower, Brora and Golspie, and disperse thousands of hooks and lines to their new fishing subclass of clearance tenants. They also allocated and rented small plots of land as appropriate. But there's a certain culpable element to the policies which can never be forgotten, and it's a lasting memory in the history of this county.

Helmsdale Harbour Historylinks Cat No. 2014_013_501

Locke admits himself, when these arrangements were first commenced, it was necessary to make lots of a larger size, essentially so that the tenants could make a living without actually relying entirely on the sea. But as the herring fisheries increased, those who were settled

upon the coast engaged annually at this occupation, they gradually started to own their own boats and it was no longer necessary to make the lots upon the same scale.

So in fact, as their policies came into bear some fruition, they reduced the size of the lots that they made available to the local inhabitants, effectively just to force them into the fishing line. Now my argument is that Embo, being part of a separate small estate, developed as a fishery on a later timescale than its neighbours to the north, effectively between 1793 and 1841, as the inhabitants did not receive any of the benefits that the southern estates provided for the northern parishes. There was no harbour generated, no hooks issued, no lines, no boats, and no lots initially to help them survive.

These resources would only come later, over time, as a result of their own self-sufficient industry and endeavour. Effectively, when they arrived in Embo, all that they had was their own water supply, a well at the rear of the village called Foran Ored, a Foran Enoch, or Sheena's Well, and this is where the barn drops from the Waste Beach down towards the sea. It is thoroughly overgrown at this time, and it hasn't been used in my memory.

Now this deficiency of provision, the northern parishes being provided with harbours and boats and so on, and the Embo one getting virtually nothing, could account for the still discernible friction which exists between the villages as they competed for the harvest of the Dornoch Firth. And I would suggest it's why Embo men, in later years of the 19th century, predominantly took wives from the fishing villages of Easter Ross before they looked north to Golspie and Brora for partners, but just my theory. In the new statistical account, 1841, the parish minister of Dornoch could observe there is indeed a colony of fishermen at Embo, but they only fish for haddocks, small cods, flounders, etc., which they sell in the fresh state.

Fisherwomen with creels
Historylinks Cat No. 2013_082_22

It is a typical picture of Embo females, the women carry the fish and creels on their backs to town and throughout the parish and sell it as best they can. The fishermen also frequently go across with their boats to the shore of Tain, which is the Easter Ross connection again, where they dispose of their fish to advantage. Of late years they have engaged in herring fishing, and this I would suggest is 20 years after Golspie, Brora and Helmsdale were actually involved heavily in the herring fishing, by hiring themselves to fish curers for the season, the fish deliverable in the fresh state at so much per crown.

As I said, the Embo people at that time had few resources, there was no harbour, natural or otherwise, and those who were fortunate to have boats had three possible rather exposed landing places to head for. In bad weather in the winter season, boats could be pulled into and beached at the Littleferry and I would suggest near where the Viking adventurers landed in 1259. It is what we call locally the Agile Corner, where the water comes underneath the old railway line, and the best beaching area is in that corner. They would just leave the boats there for the winter season to pass or for at least the worst of the weather to go by. In good weather when the boats needed to be drawn up near the village for tarring and caulking, the

shore at the back of the village could be used, and although it looks like sand just now, there's a fairly substantial rocky outcrop down there. When these rocks are exposed, as they are occasionally every two years when the sand diminishes, you can still see the traces of tar, splashes of black on the red sandstone underneath where the tarring of the boats took place.

More importantly, one of the main harbours is when a strong east wind caught them out at sea, they could head for what we call Porsne Culli, which is the area of sand between the two rocky outcrops on the south beach at Embo, and we can see Dornoch in the distance, and the burn just comes out in that corner there. So this is a very important landing place for them because it allowed them to come in really fast with the east wind behind them and just come right up on the shore here to beach their craft. Another thought struck me when I was researching this was the fact that there was no reasonably sheltered harbours near the village meant that all their craft, bearing in mind that individually they would have considerable capital investments tied up in these boats, had to be pulled up on the shore for protection and security, and I've heard stories of the Embo men pushing their boats up across the sand above the high tides.

But it also meant that these boats would be relatively small, manoeuvrable, compared to the scale of the boats perhaps that could be used in the northern harbours, and fishing accordingly had to be on a lesser scale than you could actually have with a larger craft. It also meant that when putting to sea the Embo wives had to carry their husbands out to their boats to keep them as dry as possible for their time offshore. I always think this is a time indeed when men were men and women were grateful, but times have moved on.

The only land they held was a potato patch eventually, rented by the estate to each family. This is their rigged field at the front of the village. These rigs were located in the field in front of the village and there's a disparity in the size of each lot or rig allocated to each family. Some say 120 yards by eight, long by eight yards wide. I've heard 200 yards by six yards, and these rigs appear in the title deeds of the house I live in, but they've since been absorbed into the lands of Embo Farm. The area of low ground which throughout the winter would be waterlogged and effectively a loch of the rigged field, has been drained and the field is now in cultivation for Embo Farm. Now these rigs were generally inadequate for the large families of these times, so there was the opportunity to rent land from nearby crofters.

In the case of my father-in-law's grandfather, with whom he sailed as a child in the 1930s, rented land at what they call Ballachary, just below Big Embo. They had additional rig land, and heading towards Ballachleek, which was the name for Hilton or Embo Street at that time. So there was some provision to produce the essential potato crop was the only regular agricultural experience had by the descendants of those who had been evicted a generation earlier. They're very much a one-crop economy in agricultural terms, and there was a break with the agricultural past that they had enjoyed when they had land and tenancies further to the west on the Archivandra and Balvraid side. It was never possible for them to transplant the old way of life of their parents to their new setting, since they were denied sufficient land. Instead, they were forced to develop a new way of life, the life of the fisher, and in doing so became a distinctive subgroup in the population of the coastal areas, and Embo. I feel it is still is very much a distinctive subgroup bound together by bonds of kinship, austerity, and still, slightly to some extent, the Gaelic language. Now, I may come back to some of these statements when I sum things up, but it allows me to address the argument of my title, the

Embo Na Ghort. And I think at this point it should be noted that the Dornoch Firth, Moray Firth fishing was never consistent and reliable. James Locke admits in his own words that he and his advisors had seriously miscalculated the fisheries.

They had seriously misunderstood the migratory habits of the fish, and there were, in fact, drastic fishing failures consistently from 1836 through to 1841, and this would have had a very seriously detrimental effect on the developing fishery in Embo and caused great and manifest hardship to its inhabitants. Very shortly afterwards, in the year 1845, saw the beginning of *'an Gorta Mor'*, which was the tragic Irish potato famine caused by the potato blight, and as the blight spread, so did the famine, and both struck the Highlands in the years 1846 to 1857. And it's my perception that Embo suffered very badly indeed over this extended period of some 20 years of continuous detriment and deprivation, much more so than its neighbouring communities. The fisher town in Golspie was always just a part of the main village of Golspie, and in the surrounding agricultural land, Dunrobin was a central focus where food was distributed.

Brora also, the fisher town area, was a distinct but connected part of the village of Brora. Dornoch, I feel, always had its administrators and bureaucrats and salaries, so it was, I think, a town that had external sources of income, and I feel that Embo, in its own way, relied so very much on fish and potatoes that in these years of the great Irish famine, they had nothing really. They had the cockles, they had winkles, they had dulse on which to survive, and that's, I think, where this term, *'an Gorta Mor'* hungry Embo, actually came about and drifted into common usage in later years as a term of abrasion, a term of derogation, perhaps, for other communities to address the Embo fishers.

But that's just a chip on that shoulder. There's a chip on this one as well. But these phrases work both ways. It can be a term, perhaps insult is too strong a word, but also it can be a rallying call, and that's how we feel it very much today. At the same time, it seems quite indecent to summarise so much misery in such a short time, but I'll push on. What doesn't destroy you, they say, only makes you stronger, and by the 1851 census, Embo, after its time of hardship, had 34 fishing families, more than either Golspie or Brora, and by 1855, had 16 fishing boats and 50 fishermen, again, more than its neighbours.

These figures would rise to 42 boats and 80 fishermen, by 1881, which I find absolutely astonishing by today's standards. Again, when one considers the lack of an adequate anchorage at that time, the fact that you could see the village fleet expanding when they had no harbour, it really is quite remarkable. And the village at that time entered a phase of economic and physical expansion.

The first houses of the village were said to have been constructed from the rocks lifted up from the shore. The earliest one, by written legend, being at the top of Back Street. We were told different. We were always told that it was this building, just behind the bottom of Front Street, and although it would not have had a tin roof in those days, I think we were always

assured that was really the first house of the village, because it faced the wrong way. It was facing into the sea, and they learned a very bitter lesson, and all other houses in Embo thereafter kept the left shoulder to the marine element, and they kept the back to the north wind. It is still there standing, and whether that is what I said is legend or not, I cannot be sure, but that is the story that we were given.

Front Street EMBO, East Sutherland

Front Street Historylinks Cat No. 2008_020_194

The modern shape of the village used building stone, not from the beach, but from the quarry at the rear of the village. It's on the back beyond the football pitch as you come out towards the edge. It is not the modern dump, but previously was the dump, and there is a remarkably high sandstone edge, very near the surface. You don't have to dig down much to get it, and there must be fully 14, 15 feet of a seam there, and accessible round the bottom here, and out towards Back Street, where the Back Beach Road is.

So that's where the stone came for the rest of the village, and at that point there were five streets which I suppose engraved in most postman's memories, Back Street, King Street, Gate Street, Terrace Street, and Front Street. And then, of course, the construction of the school, I presume in the 1870s as part of the construction of all schools in the area. The Village Hall was built to thanks to a commitment of the then school headmaster, I think I saw his name was Meek, on land donated by several estates and the timber for the Hall came by large ship into Littleferry, and was then shipped to Embo in the village's own fleet.

Embo Village Hall Historylinks Cat No. 2004_016_003

I do feel guilty because I was partly instrumental, at least, in the demolition of this hall.

In 1894, land was set aside, finally, for a harbour, and I got this map from the 1905 survey showing Embo of the time, and the position of the harbour to be, though there is in fact a story to come about that. Other points of interest on this map is we have Porse Macooly, that I mentioned earlier, where the Embo boats come in from the east side, round the corner, and manage to run in there with an east wind chasing them.

Embo Pier Historylinks Cat No. 2001_312_001_61

On this corner also we have, I'll come to this shortly again, the Embo Yards, and the burn flowing in from past Embo House, out towards the sea. Embo itself, you'll notice, extends no further than the tops of the streets I've just mentioned, though the school is actually in place at this time, as is the hall. There's no growth, nothing here, between the top of Back Street and the actual railway line, which by this time is in place, and for which, by the way, so much excellent research has been done by your organisation.

I'm assured that the last port of call of any Embo resident on their way out of this world was to stay overnight in the Village Hall, and then be carried on this track down to the yards towards the burial ground at the Free Church. Embo was very much a Free Church village at that time.

So ground was set aside, allocated for the construction of the pier, but unfortunately no pier appeared. You can actually see the Embo links, and a very sizeable piece of ground donated by Southern Estates for the construction of the pier, and we'll come back to the pier again shortly.
The population of the village recorded in 1901 was 546 and 700 in 1910, at which point it very nearly matched the population of Dornoch. We were told at that time that there was a football team in every street, as well as the main village team, the Embo Bruins. Also at this time was the heyday, I feel, of the itinerant Embo fishwife, a common sight throughout the towns and country areas in that time. The village boundary after this time expanded to the west along Gate Street, and new villas were built, which actually meant there must have been a fair bit of wealth starting to appear. This is what we call the old post office here *(title on right-hand corner of the building)*, and there is Tarbert Villa, which is a home to one of us in the audience here, a previous home to the very homesick Aileen Fraser in Vancouver.

Embo old Post Office Historylinks Cat No. 2018_011_07

Nothing in front of the Post Office but stretching up towards the north the railway station had just been constructed.
Embo Railway Station Historylinks Cat No. 2019_073_12

Also after this we have School Street and Hall Street appearing each with alleyways between the properties. These were rigorously maintained, and are still maintained, as they allow passage from the rear of the village through towards the front of the village and the allotment field there. This is obviously before the bypass comes into play. Everything else at that time was owned by the Duke, and this was in fact deposed to the Caledonian Banking Company at that time, which I presume was the forerunner of either the Bank of Scotland or the Royal Bank, I'm not sure which.

As a matter of interest, when the bypass came through, my father had to sell that particular piece of land at the bottom to accommodate it for the princely sum of £10. He must be

spinning in his grave at the thought of what he could have got for it, but never mind. There are houses and a warehouse at the yards.

The yards today are completely unrecognisable from the yards of a previous era. The yards being the sweep of land across the middle there where all these caravans and residential homes are situated. It's very much the industrial centre of the village.

There were houses down here, a few houses, and a very eminent Embo citizen was actually born in one of them, and a warehouse down here as well, and I think one of the first village smoking houses for curing the fish. There was also, surprisingly enough, a lifeboat station. The lifeboat station is where the yards burn enters the sea past Port St. Nicolay, the landing place along there, and the lifeboat station is down on this particular stretch here.

Again, on some states of the sand you can see the timbers being displayed which run out towards there. I think some of the old books, R.J. Mackay's book particularly, feature a picture of the lifeboat station master of the time. Again, I think it's five years since I last was down there and saw the timbers appearing, and I wasn't quite sure what they were until I asked, but they're discernible slipway, wooden slipway down towards the beach.

So really that was a fairly good time for Embo all in all, but as with many villages across the whole country, the tragic events of the First War marked the start of the decline of these inshore fisheries, not just because of the tragic toll on young lives, but through the loss of the German and Russian markets for herring, and maintained the lack of compensation for boats commandeered by the government during the war effort, and again, an increasingly observable decline in fish stocks. The human population as the fish population also declined because of emigration brought about by the opportunities of land and career and business and commerce offered by the USA and Canada. This influence obviously still pertains to the modern day.

The technology of fishing was also changing, and the long-line technique favoured by my father-in-law as a child to accompany his grandfather in the brown-sail Zulus, the fleet of brown-sail Zulus. Why they're called Zulus, I never ever found out. To go at the herring in the 1930s was challenged fatally and permanently by the same netters based in Helmsdale who it is said swept the first clear of any fish.

You've always got to have a fall guy, we'll blame the Helmsdale guys. Interesting to note that the single mast here and the brown-sail which seem to be typical of these craft, size will be about 14 yards, 42 feet or so, and the WK means registered out of wick. Many of the boats had English names surprisingly such as Mispa and the Pearl, I can't remember any of the others, specifically because having paid money to buy the boat they did not wish to outlay any more funds in re-registering the name and so the English names carried forward.

I think along the way, I forget which street it is, there's a Mispa cottage in Embo. Whether the boat's named after the cottage or the cottage named after the boat I could not be sure. As I said there was a permanent blow to the Embo fishing fleet this time, the reduction in fish and the effects of the large sea netters coming out of the Good Harbour in Helmsdale.

Around this time, as legend has it, and I've heard two stories but this is the one I like, the Embo fishermen pulled up their boats one last time on the little ferry and burned them in a

final gesture of defiance before leaving to join the Merchant Navy or to take up the Royal Navy or to take up such non-fishing jobs as they could. If you look carefully in this corner by the Agile you'll see the remnants of the Embo fleet seen to this day jutting quite starkly and from the sand at a low tide and it's a very emotional memorial to a time in a trade that's gone forever. There are in fact I think 11 of them that I could count last time I was down. So it was a fairly substantial and sizeable fleet and just gone due to circumstances, economic change.

Ironically, throughout the early 1930s the headmaster of the primary school, Mr Femister, and had been campaigning vigorously for a pier to be built. (There is a Femister Crescent in Embo named after both him and his son Captain Jack Femister.) He produced an avalanche of letters to the Scottish office making the case for the Embo fishermen and set up a public subscription to raise the funds. He wrote extensively to politicians, statesmen, actors, actresses and public figures on both sides of the Atlantic to seek assistance. Now there are copies of these letters still in existence. I've seen them but I don't know where they are now. They went with the treasurer or secretary of the old Village Hall Committee and it's quite remarkable the amount of work that this man had put into raising funds. Astonishingly he raised enough money despite the Great Depression to eventually convince the then Secretary of State to fund construction. It wasn't finished in time to prevent the loss of the main fishing fleet but some of the remaining Zulus could still use the pier and berth in deep water with comfort.

Even today some of the old men in the village still maintain the pier was built in the wrong place and should have been built further to the west at Port St. Nicolay, perhaps down by the lifeboat station. Despite the appearance of the pier it was the end of an industry and an era. Actually I feel a gut-wrenching irony in the whole history of the village that it just arrived too late. The cavalry came over the hill too late and the pier was built at too late to save the industry. In fact that was the original pier. There is a certain insult added to injury when a second pier was spontaneously built, I understand at government behest, towards the end of the 1930s and it immediately caused the silting up of the harbour. I'm assured that in the old days when the first pier was in place a 40-foot Zulu could be beaching up in the pier and just over the bank here was a manual winch which is used to pull them even farther up the shore for caulking or maintenance. But the second pier caused the main silting up and that is one of the legends that we live with today.

To be decently brief, the Second Great War caused further trauma, turmoil and emigration. Young men went away and women went away to serve their country and of those that survived few made it back, despite the village having been connected for mains water and electricity and a lot of modern conveniences at the time. The stories I heard was that they took jobs, married, set up families in the south and never really ever made it back. That's life.

This brings me to my own story, the bits that I can remember in the 50s and 60s, that I saw and experienced directly. We were the first generation in Embo for which Gaelic was not the main means of communication. Now there were words and phrases which we understood but it was very much the language of the older generation heard regularly in the three remaining shops in the village; a tiny shot in Back Street, the Post Office in Gate Street and where currently Dave Hannibal lives, ad the post office and, currently where Dave Hannibal lives, R.J. Mackay's Emporium.

Gaelic was not seen as being useful for a young person to learn in school but there were other economic reasons. The village had been opened up to the outside world very much by the Grannie's Heilan Hame development which took a substantial number of tourists into the village, far beyond the moderate number of seasonal visitors who had been in the habit of renting cottages every summer. As I said earlier Nancy Dorian in her three books on East Southern Gaelic, two of which are readable, one of which is not, provides an excellent commentary on the changes of these decades in Embo. She was there as an adult recording as an academic. At the time some of the old habits prevailed in most rural villages driven by the war time experience of rationing and previous ages of deprivation.

As children we were shown to go to the point of the ferry at the time of big April tides to gather sand eels. These were as much for our own consumption as for bait. We would also go up to Skelbo Muir in the spring to collect seagulls' eggs. Now not as dramatic I give you as the cliff hanging activities on St Kilda but at the same time I hope you'll appreciate it's a very similar philosophy. We were shown how to dig lugworm, it's a very skilled task actually, and set long lines on the east beach beyond the rocks at the bottom of Gate Street, which have the name Craig na Dordogne. So I think the beach was so important to the Embo people that they named every part of it so they knew specifically what they were talking about. So there's Craig na Dordogne and there is a few seagulls hanging out there, very few these days. So we were introduced to the long line at the edge of the tide, put your line out and go back and collect it on the next tide. Not just on this corner but a favourite haunt of ours was along at the Craig Rua, the red rock. The railway hut is just there, the red rock which is past the haunt of the seals on the ferry side and this was an identifiable feature which we headed for in order to set our lines out on the edge of the tide there. So we were brought up very much on a hunter-gatherer kind of routine, the cockles, mussels, winkles played an important part of our collection and also found at this time, snaring and ferreting across the Coul links. I suppose in a way it's a lot of young boy stuff, but to a certain extent it was driven by folk memory. We were shown how to do these things and we were encouraged to do them and we did spend a lot of youthful energy pursuing this kind of activity.

There was substantial change in the offing and this is coming into something that most people here will appreciate. The arrival of the reconstruction work at Nigg in the 1970s and this provided a remarkable and significant boost to the Edinburgh economy and the whole of East Sutherland and Easter Ross. It was possible for the first time in many years for a whole generation either directly or indirectly to earn good money without moving away from the area and, in fact, allowed many exiles to return home. It also attracted a number of immigrant workers to boost the population in the area and this in many ways was a golden age for the village.

In my memory the football team was very active and won the county championship for the first time in 1979 and in that general era Embo did in fact declare itself independent from the rest of the UK! We printed our own currency, 'the Cuddy'. I'm not quite sure what status it would have in modern days but it was an attempt to show the individuality of the village and also as a way of earning money. So we do have our own currency and really my story is moving to a close.

In the present day the football team still exists and personally I feel that an active football team reflects an active sports activity which reflects in turn a sound economy driving any

community. The economic situation driven by the construction boom over 15 years has seen a reasonably healthy village. Not counting Grannie's Heilan Hame, there are 21 independent private sector businesses in the village, none of which has received a single penny of state assistance. They are fuelled only by the raw spirit of free enterprise. The old hunter-gatherer habits of my youth and previous eras are not so prevalent, much more civilised, but the traditional village names are still there, Mackay, Ross, Cumming, Fraser and Grant, with the add-ons such as my own family being assimilated into the village network as time passes.

Winnagrig 8 School Street is currently working on the old census information and is building up a network of family trees which I think will be an authoritative reference for the bloodlines in the village in due course. I think she's involved in a project tracing the whole history of the village, much more detailed than I can do, and her network of genealogy may be of interest to the body here. Now to my mind the point of history is as much as to record the past, not just to chart where we've been, but to try to use that base to map our way ahead in uncertain times.

We are in uncertain times now and really times are always uncertain; that's the predicament of the human species. We found that the Embo Trust was acceptable to address a number of projects which are underway addressing the current consolidation and future expansion of the village. As I speak we are working to acquire the Fourpenny Plantation at the west of the village, moving back to the west again from whence we came. The National Forest Land Scheme aims to re-establish the Fourpenny Crofts which were throughout this area in the pre-war period.

If you're in the Carnegie Building, not in the main meeting area but in the little side lounge where councillors in the past used to get some sustenance after a hard morning's talking, there is a substantial map of Sutherland and on that map you can actually see the trace of the old crofts in the Fourpenny Plantation area. So we're looking to reacquire this, re-establish the crofts, and assign them to young local people to really improve what is a fairly dire demographic profile. This project, if successful, will also provide a significant economic diversification for the village in a number of ways, and a much-needed boost to the biodiversity of the area. I think we can do so much here that is a necessary improvement in all kinds of ways. We are also simultaneously looking back to the sea, examining the potential, of the sea croft. Now just as a croft is a piece of land surrounded by regulation, a sea croft is a piece of water surrounded by regulation, and I have no better definition than that at the present.

Things are moving, and going through the Scottish Parliament is a marine bill which will form a Scottish Marine Organisation to take over the responsibilities of the County States Commission, and we've got to be poised or prepared to see what can come of that. We see this resource as a mainstay of the village through many past years, but currently it is significantly barren. Anybody who's out there will notice that it's just nothing but sand for a number of miles out. In fact, after about a mile you can still offload from a boat and stand on a sandbank, such is the lack of depth. It is a virulent, powerful and dangerous environment in which to operate, but at the same time we have to see what can be done. Our perception at the moment is to see this as an opportunity for marine management and aquaculture, rather than the fishing of previous generations, and also perhaps as a source of energy generation.

I used a phrase in an article I wrote that we were the Embo fishers, but we might also be the Embo crofters as we move west here. Our perception is quite clear; we were the Embo of the farm in the past, but never again if we can help it. That's the environment and the energy of the village at the moment.

So thank you very much for listening so intently to my ramblings. I hope you found them entertaining, if not illuminating, and I'm quite happy to answer such questions as I can manage to answer. Thank you very much indeed.

Does anybody have any questions? If I don't know the answer, I will simply make it up!.

Where did Grannie's Heilan Hame come from?
Grannie's Heilan Hame was developed by the McIntosh family, who are currently in, either fourth or fifth generation in Embo, and it was developed from the Boston house, which was simply a detached villa in the very front of the village. Strangely enough, put on a hill, it's 200 yards in front of the last house on Hall Street. Grannies Heilan Hame was immortalised in the song by the late Sandy MacFarlane and I can remember the song and the Heather Bells blooming and so on in my youth. (See 2021_023 picture #14670 for further detail including a pdf file) There was an ongoing moderate tourist industry in Embo, the renting of houses and holiday homes, which brought in very valuable money to the economy of the village. But John McIntosh a very brilliant man saw the opportunity to develop his land on the Embo links as a caravan site. The 60s was very much the age of mobile caravan, the towing caravan. And it really did very, very well. I remember going through 1960, 1961, standing at the bridge, as all the boys used to do in those days with a convoy of caravans coming through, they were coloured green, a horrible colour, and no longer than about 10 feet. And that was the start of it. About two years later when I was in the RAF, I came home on leave and John McIntosh was at the station and he said, 'Do you want to live here?' 'I said yes. And on the way home he said, how would you like living beside that small place near Embo? Now in those days there was no bypass, so everything came through down Gate Street and turned right at the post office and down towards the caravan site that way and it was just bedlam. I convinced my old man to sell his plot at the part of his garden at the bottom there to accommodate the bypass and so on. But it has developed gradually and one way or another it has passed into large-scale ownership via Park and it has steadily grown over the years.

' What was the reason for the second pier?'
I don't know. Nobody can understand that I think it was a government initiative, not a village initiative, providing shelter from the west side. I think government officials at the time felt that they could improve the shelter of the pier by narrowing the access here. But they didn't recognise what it would actually do to change things. My father-in-law can remember coming in on such an East Wind that they missed the pier and actually beached in lieu. It took forever. Remember the land was allocated for the pier in 1894 and that pier would not have been built until 1934 and the second one appeared just before the Second World War. So that was just the irony of the whole situation, that just as the fleet was declining they put the facilities in place, which just must mean we're just unlucky and that's it.

There is a picture of a boat with the six crew, was that the sort of typical size?

That was it. My father-in-law Davy said, he could see them in his youth as a boy looking out from 15 Front Street, looking down the village and he could see the men, the fishers, gathering at the bottom of the street and looking at the sea. And then as soon as he saw a crowd he knew there was going to be some action. So he would dive down to the pier and jump in his grandfather's boat and hide in there until they actually went out across to the Golspie side. That was where the main fishing was, across the rocks in Golspie or down by Portmahomack. It was the north and southeast areas that are really where the fish lay and that's very much true today. My mother-in-law, I think you know, she's 92 and has some lovely stories of the Embo fish ladies walking with the creels. I didn't have an opportunity to mention the fact that so many of them, the dying generation, followed the herring fishing right round the coast of the UK down by Plymouth and some families were actually Devon based. They came back with men from Devon and also up and down by Yarmouth, Aberdeen and Wick. They were very widely travelled, remarkably widely travelled, much more than I am just now. It was a remarkable life.

'There was always a talk of strong links between Inver and Embo'. Very much so and I think that's where the Ross name came from that is currently in Embo. I think Inver was cleared during the war and a lot of the people from Inver went to live in Embo. But I think there was also a previous connection. I think Inver was a fairly deprived fishing village in the way that Embo was and I think there is a certain amount of common appreciation of a shared circumstance. But again, that's my theory. I couldn't say for sure. There's a transfer of families at that time and it also went the other way. I think some of the men in the village, like Jock Mackay, went to live on the Inver side for some time. There was also a great connection with Tain as well. In fact more a connection to the south than there is to the fishing villages to the north, even though they still maintain the same southern Gaelic. Ballintore, Inver maintained Gaelic and Portmahomack into recent years.

'Were there any pleasure cruises done from the pier?'
Yes. In 1963-4 there were a couple of initiatives. One was pony trips along the beach and back again with the ponies were housed in what was the 'Front Park' inside the bypass. There was also an Embo man, John Gully, who came back from the Merchant Navy, and took a speedboat out which was an interest to many people. I think he actually started taking it out on a Sunday, which was greatly frowned upon by an older Embo generation and he was much maligned for that. I didn't stop him. More recently Grant's have been doing it with water skis. I think that was the one speedboat, and perhaps there were one or two Embo fishing crafts that still went out, modern boats engine driven, not the old style.

'The Gaelic language certainly and the culture was preserved in Embo for a much longer period than the neighbouring areas'.
Very much so. '*Why was this?*' I think in terms of communication it's down, I think two reasons. Simply the position of the village, in terms of access you actually have to want to go there. And also the fact that for so many years Embo people could work in Embo, they could fish, they could make a living there, they were entirely self-sufficient and self-reliant so they didn't have to go really far out of the village. The menfolk could actually stay and work here and provide the fish and it was the females who actually tramped the miles round about the local area. In fact Gaelic was still much a language in the 1930s, 40s and the crofting areas and I think Embo Gaelic has been linked by Nancy Dorian to the Gaelic that she found in Evelix crofts, and also further west to crofts on the Bonar side as well. There was a horizontal spread

of the language and the Gaelic to the north was discernibly different in structure. But I think in Embo it has been a self-contained community and people have to want to go there for a reason. It is only since people have gone there for tourist reasons or for work reasons or for retirement reasons that it has now become very much the language of a previous generation not of mine.

'With regards to Embo future, could you just explain a little bit more about the Crofts at Fort Henry please?' Certainly. There's a meeting on Monday night to take this further again. Currently, if I can explain, there is a forestry scheme, National Forest Land Scheme, in which the government has instructed or directed the Forestry Commission to divest itself of those plantations which are uneconomic. It would cost them money to take chip timber out of this wood. And so they're looking at public benefit accruing to the sale or the transfer of these plantations and all over Scotland it's happening. This is just one example of a phenomenon that's happening right across the whole country as communities take control of areas of public land. The ambition here is to create a cluster of Crofts in the south-east corner, what are called woodland Crofts not just in Embo but throughout the whole country. The downside is across the whole country, that local people, young people, cannot start to get their foot on this property ladder. So we're trying to do something positive and to correct the demographic profile which we notice is ageing. 30-40% of the village is now 60 or more, and to try and retain young people we're going to try and give them is land. But we're not going to give them land from the point of view of private gain. They will just sell it and go away and live in California. So what we're going to try and do is give it to them as tenants, the old 1886 Crofting tenancy, without the right to buy. They will have the land, they'll have a 10-acre plot, we'll try to construct a house on it for them so they'll have the necessities for family life abut they will not be able to cash in and sell. If they come into the scheme, they come in with their eyes open and they know the rules. They come in with just what they have. If they leave the scheme, they leave accordingly with nothing. So we try to make it sustainable because that's the only way that the Forestry Commission will actually wear what we're trying to do. Sustainability and public benefit of the scheme as opposed to the private gain, the free market. So our aim is to provide an opportunity to widen skills back into agriculture and also into forestry and timber management. It's a remarkably skilled village and in fact if you look at the Highland Council statistics, it comes out a second only to Clashmore as being the most skilled and educated community in the county. It has that index and I think it's because of the trades which predominate in Embo. So we're going to try and use these trades as skill equity to produce there, generate a new cropping township in that area. Very much a trial section in that south-east corner is what we're looking at.

'What size would each croft be?'
Four-hectare, ten acres, that's the scheme we're looking at. It's the average of all crofts I would say across Scotland and we're tied very much to a tenancy arrangement.

'*This would be self-sustaining?'*
Self-sustaining but also stable in the longer term in that nothing will ever be sold. The holdings will always be there; they will not be sold out of the control of the Embo Trust.

'And who provides the funding for the housing?'

Good question, if you have an answer let me know. Our negotiations with the Lottery Funding was based on valuation of £370,000 for the plantation including standing timber. We hope they stick at that and we are looking for Lottery money to actually this purchase. Thereafter we are looking at grant assistance to put in the infrastructure necessary. But if you think about what actually goes into a house, there are four building components. There's the land the house stands on, the materials that actually construct the house, there's the skilled labour which does the work and there is at the end of the day the profit element which either the builder or subsequent owner would seek to realise on sale of it. We are taking out elements one and four so that just leaves the middle two which we actually consider. In terms of materials then we have a lot of building materials here. We have a forest full of building materials, not the best of stuff but there's sufficient there which I think will do our purpose. The skill comes in form of skill equity, in other words if they sign up they work. They have to put something in to get something back out. What they get out is a tenancy but it will be a low-cost tenancy we are trying to realise. And we are not just trying to realise it, I believe we have encouragement from the Scottish Government, this is very much a test case which we are being pushed and people are being pushed to see. So much of my life has been failure so if it drops then that's it. It's sadder than that. It is an attempt to stop the drift, improve our demographic profile and provide an energy in the cramped village. We are tied completely in that corner and we need to have that growth and let young people just generate and do and work. So that's the philosophy behind it and we are moving along slowly and hopefully with support. We are trying to be as informative as we can. It started in 2006 as a crofter's union initiative and we have had regular meetings with the young guys and girls in the village and every meeting I start by saying this may not happen but every time they reply, you've got to try. That is the energy that keeps the thing going.

'Can I just ask for each tree that's going to be chopped down, will you be planting another tree?'
Yes, we are maintaining and we are committed to maintaining the current forestry commission management plan for the plantation. It has been a tree cover for so long that I can't imagine it without a tree cover being there. So regeneration will follow on as the forestry commission would do anyway. We are bound by that and it's just an opportunity of putting a sprinkling of township croft houses in among the trees and trying to generate a new way of doing things.

There is now a time for anybody to get into crofting should they wish. There is the 'front door' which is the free market, which despite its ups and downs will always be with us. Then there is what I call the back door and this is the idea that It allows young people and their community ownership to get access to land. I maintain so many of the village families came from that corner in days past then there is a reason to look for return to the land.

We are holding meetings at the Community Centre and Rona Rigg is doing a history of the village and I think she will actually be accessing a lot of material and putting it on-line to be available to a wide audience. The broad scheme of things in the 80's was very much an initiative by Sheila Board who was District Councillor for Dornoch Rural at that time and she pushed forward the development.

The primary school closed late 70s with the promise that the school would remain in village ownership to be reopened at a time in the future whenever required. It was turned at that time into a Community centre which was a reasonable use because the Village Hall was deteriorating quite rapidly and has very recently just been removed altogether.

'On behalf of the society thank you Jim for a very fascinating and informative talk. It was great to hear all that passion for the present Embo. I thought it would just be about Embo in the past so it's marvellous to hear there's so much hope. Thank you very much.'