

West Coast Archaeological Services

Discovery of a Time Capsule from Coire Church, Torridon

Report on the Time Capsule Contents and Its Significance to the Historical Record



Illustration of the imagined completed Coire Church from a pamphlet found within the time capsule

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1. Introduction

In February 2015, during the conversion of Coire Church into a new residential property, the discovery of a glass time capsule was made in the south wall of the porch of the church. Located within the third course of stonework up from the floor, the capsule was concealed within a hollowed-out stone, while the glass container was covered with a yellow sandstone lid (Michael Connor *pers comm*). The glass container itself was unfortunately broken, but the contents have remained in extremely good condition, and consist of a collection of coins, newspapers, a local gazette, a pamphlet pertaining to the construction of the Church in 1887, and a handwritten letter identifying the contents of the capsule, which marked the time capsule and Coire Church ó then known as Torridon Church ó as a commemoration of Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee. Methylated spirits present within the container, presumably to aid in preservation, have unfortunately stained two of the newspapers and very slightly the gazette. The nature of the contents provide a momentary glimpse into later Victorian life in a small Scottish community, as well as the British Empire at large, and will surely be of interest to historians and the modern Torridon residents.

2. General Background of Coire Church

Coire Church is situated in the former parish of Applecross, on the west coast of Scotland in the county of Ross and Cromarty. A desk-based assessment (DBA) prior to the development work was carried out (Peteranna and Fraser, 2014), and although some information existed with regards to the wider community in which the Church was built, there was scant historical evidence available concerning the Church itself, and very little could be gleaned from the records beyond its construction date of 1887, and its religious affiliation with the Free Church of Scotland.

The Church itself is built on a small spur overlooking Loch Torridon, and is a large rectangular building with a small vestibule attached to its eastern wall. Constructed of dressed sandstone, it is simply built, and roofed in slate. The floors were of unvarnished wood and the stone walls unclad (Peteranna and Fraser 2014, 13).

3. Time Capsule Contents

The contents of the time capsule were as follows:

- Four denominations of Jubilee-issued coins
- Three contemporary newspapers
- A pamphlet relating to the construction of the church
- A local gazette
- A handwritten letter

3.1 Coins

The four coins are identified as follows: a double florin, a half crown, a shilling, and a sixpence (**Plate 1**). All four coins were part of those released at the time of the Queen's Golden Jubilee. They were not entirely a commemorative release, as Lant states: 'The fact that it is known as a Jubilee issue is more because it was made to be released contemporaneously with that occasion rather than because the Jubilee provided the *raison d'être* for the change.' (1973: 132). The coins featured a new portrait of the Queen, and new decorative features to the artwork on each face.

Two of these coins in particular represent an interesting part of numismatic history. The new sixpence — apart from being struck in silver — was completely identical to the far more valuable gold half sovereign — and had to be withdrawn from circulation only months after issue when fraudulent gold-plated silver sixpences began to appear (London Mint Office, 2015). The double florin — worth 4 shillings — was also a contentious coin, its size being the only differentiator between it and the recently re-introduced crown, which was worth 5 shillings. This coin enjoyed a relatively short and unpopular circulation of only three years before it too had its minting and circulation halted (Dyer 1994, 114).



Plate 1 **Coins (from left to right): Double Florin, Half-crown, Shilling, Sixpence**

3.2 Newspapers

The three newspapers — *The Times*, *The Scotsman*, and the *Inverness Courier* — are all in good condition, though both *The Times* and the *Inverness Courier* have been affected by methylated spirit staining. *The Times*, issued June 22nd 1887, contains a detailed account of the Queen's Jubilee celebrations in London, and lists the other celebrations taking place both nationally and internationally. News articles comment on recent troubles with Ireland and feature a criticism on the explorer Henry Stanley's behaviour in Africa, major events of the time.

The Scotsman, issued June 29th 1887, contains the usual advertisement lists and brief articles about the Jubilee celebrations. A letter has been written in by Reverend Angus Fiddes regarding the Torridon proprietor, Duncan Darroch, and his generosity regarding the Jubilee celebrations. The letter is similar to one published in the *Inverness Courier*, which is described in detail below.

The Inverness Courier and General Advertiser, July 1st 1887, is stained by the methylated spirits (**Plate 2**). The paper is a single large sheet, folded into quarters, with the typical advertisement lists and news articles. The articles featured range from Highland local news about the various Jubilee celebrations and other events, to the Queen's reaction to the Jubilee celebrations, and political news from London and abroad.

Two short pieces within the *Inverness Courier* directly relate to Torridon. One refers to the Jubilee celebrations and describes how 300 local people held a small parade along Loch Torridon, before receiving a speech by a Mr Watt about the Queen and the accomplishments of the British Empire, before the group sang the National anthem (page 6). The other is entitled 'Jubilee Gift to the Torridon Crofters' (page 5), and is a letter written by Torridon resident, Reverend Angus Fiddes, to describe how the Torridon proprietor, Mr Darroch, had issued a statement to his tenants, crofters and cottars - that no rent would be collected for the Queen's Jubilee year. The letter goes on to describe the good relationship Mr Darroch has with the Torridon people, and how he has facilitated the existence of much-needed infrastructure within the community including a post office, new roads, a medical officer and a missionary. The construction of the new church is also noted: 'Nor will his [Mr Darroch's] latest act be less appreciated. He has contracted for the building of a small church, in memory of the Queen's Jubilee, for the use of the people, instead of the old dilapidated meeting place erected by a former proprietor of Torridon more than a hundred years ago.'



Plate 2 *Inverness Courier*, issued July 1st 1887, note staining from methylated spirits

3.3 Church Pamphlet

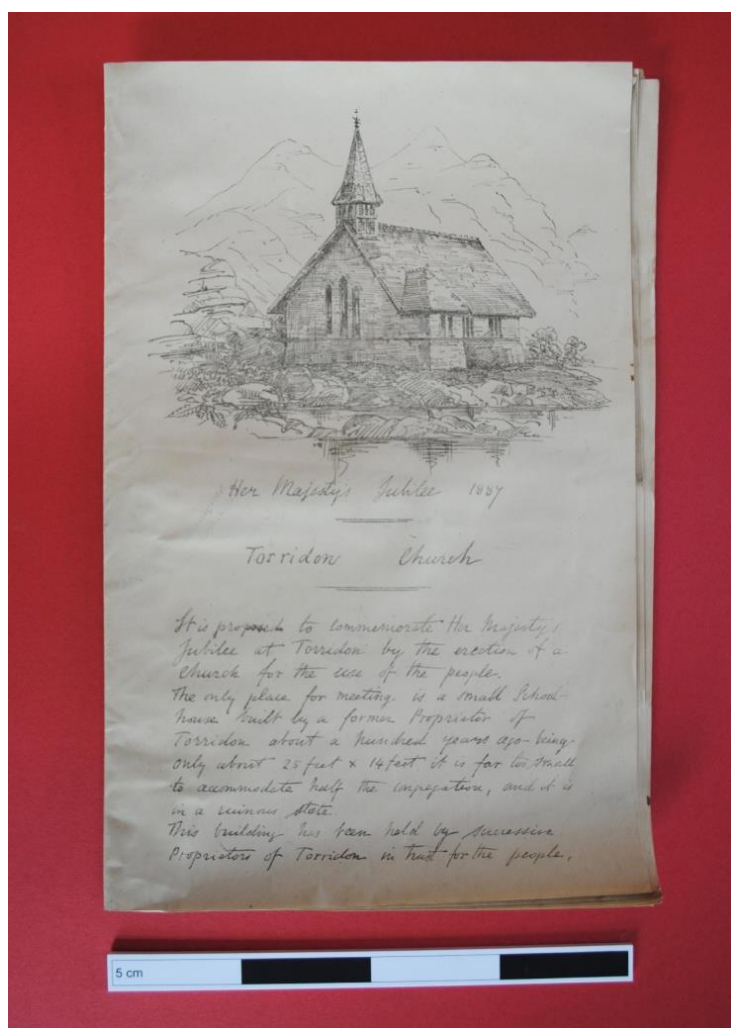


Plate 3 **Front cover of the Church pamphlet**

The pamphlet (**Plate 3**) describes the necessity for a new church in Torrion ó and doubles as both a promotion for the project and a plea for donations to assist towards its construction. The front page features an illustration of the new church, envisioned in its complete stage. It is interesting to note that once the Church was completed, it lacked a spire ó perhaps indicative of a lack of funds (**Plate 4**). Below this and on the overleaf, the text describes the need for a new church in Torrion, and how the construction of such a building was to commemorate the Queen's Jubilee. It is pointed out that the only meeting place for worship available was an old school, gifted to the community a hundred years earlier, which had fallen into disrepair. Instead of asking for the school to be renovated, the community asked the Proprietor of Torrion, a Mr Darroch, if a new church building could be erected instead. There is a list of names of both monetary donors and also pledged hours of labour on the church from the community.



Plate 4 **Coire Church as it currently stands, note the lack of spire**

3.4 Local Gazette – *The Gladiator*

The gazette, named 'The Gladiator' is Number 61 of Volume 2, and consists of letters to the editor, articles on contemporaneous events, a small diary on local events, illustrations and witticisms. Written with a generally comedic tone, it is an insightful read into small community Victorian Highland life. The editor's name, and those of the contributors, is not mentioned.

The main article, entitled 'The Yankeries' (37-41) is a personal account from May 9th 1887, of the opening day of the American Exhibition in London (Rosen 2008). It focuses on the world famous 'Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show'. The writer describes the huge crowds in attendance, and the different facets of the show. He mentions Colonel William F Cody 'Buffalo Bill' as well as 'two girls who make some really wonderful shots with repeating rifles', undoubtedly referring to the sharpshooters Annie Oakley and Lillian Smith. An illustration is included, comparing the headdress of a Native American chief and a Victorian lady (Plate 5). It is unclear whether this is being written by a Torridon resident, or a friend of the editor who lives further afield, but it still transports the grand event from London to the very north of Scotland, and exemplifies the interest and impact the show must have had on the British public.

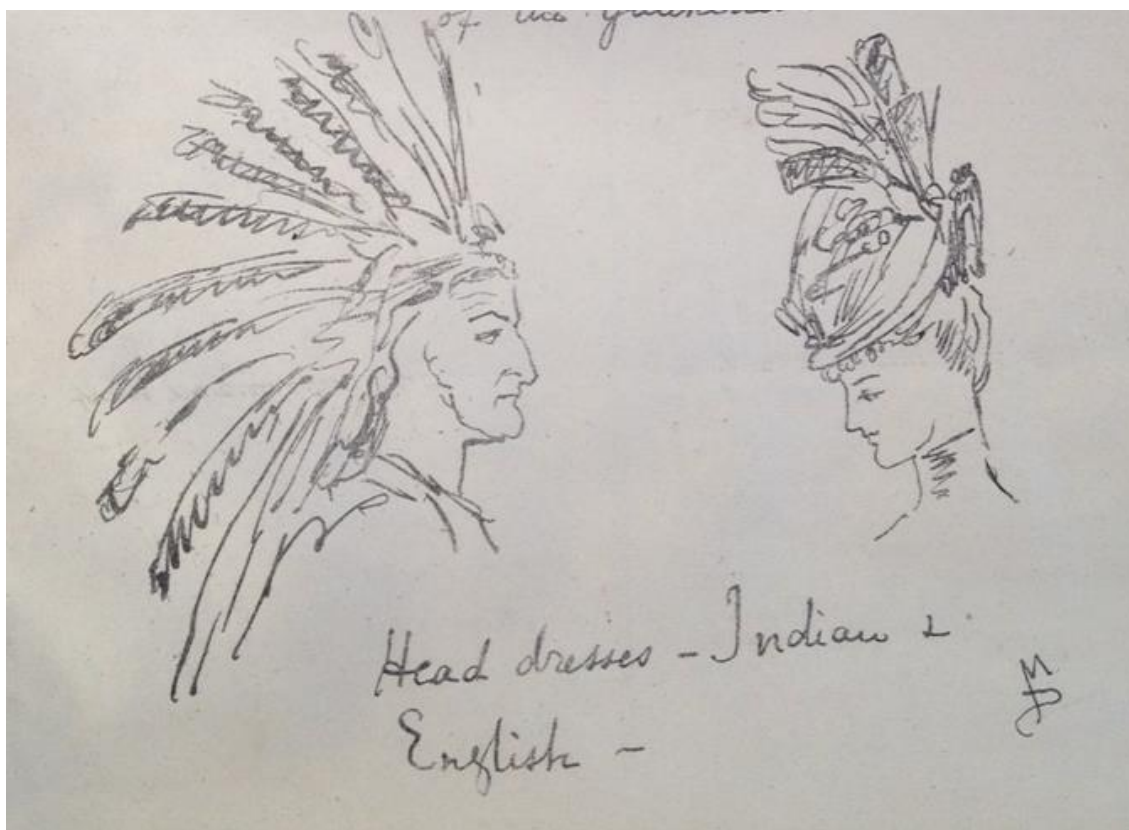


Plate 5 **Illustration depicting the headdress of a Native American and Victorian Lady**
(Gladiator 1887, 39)

The progress of the Church's construction at the time of writing is described in a short article, entitled *The Torridon Church Jubilee*:

The Torridon Church is progressing at a marvellous rate, thanks to the very fine weather, and the height of the windows has already been reached. It is placed on a commanding position on the top of the moraine a little Eastward of Colin's house.

In spite of ecclesiastical dog-in-the-mangerism, and all threats of spiritual penalties, the people of Alligin, directly the site was marked out, flocked to the ground with their picks and spades and in an incredibly short time had the rough surface cleaned down so as to admit of the foundations being laid. This was their contribution to Her Majesty's Jubilee, and a more hearty and praise worthy one there could not be.

Friends at a distance have been most generous in giving their aid in money, for which the people here are most grateful. (Gladiator 1887, 41)

Further to this is a concise diary of miscellaneous events within the community (Gladiator 1887, 43-4), such as June 1st being the date on which the crofters began levelling the ground for the Church and June 15th the day the Church actually began to be built, as well as just interesting community commentary, both serious and light-hearted, such as the mention of an outbreak of Whooping Cough that forced Alligin school to close on the 1st of June, the attempt to tickle trout in the Corrie River on June 20th and the discovery of the first ripe strawberry on June 26th.

Also included is the limerick about the Lady of Niger (Gladiator 1887, 34):

*There was a young lady of Niger
Who went for a ride on a Tiger;
They returned from the ride,
The young lady inside,
And a smile on the face of that Tiger*

This limerick is traditionally attributed to an unknown anonymous writer, but here it is signed -Arch. Moocheø Whether or not this is the original author, or merely someone who has written it in for interestø sake, will perhaps be determined by any interested independent parties.

Throughout the gazette are jokes and riddles, often accompanied by illustrations (**Plate 6**), and overall there is the feeling that it reflects the lives of those who have perhaps a more prosperous place within the community. The local gazette was enclosed within the church pamphlet. The printing company is identified within the gazette as -Prutchkin & Coø at Torridon, Auchnasheen, N.B.: June 30th, 1887ø (Gladiator 1887, 42), and the handwriting, paper and style of the print indicate both the pamphlet and gazette were printed here using the lithography technique.

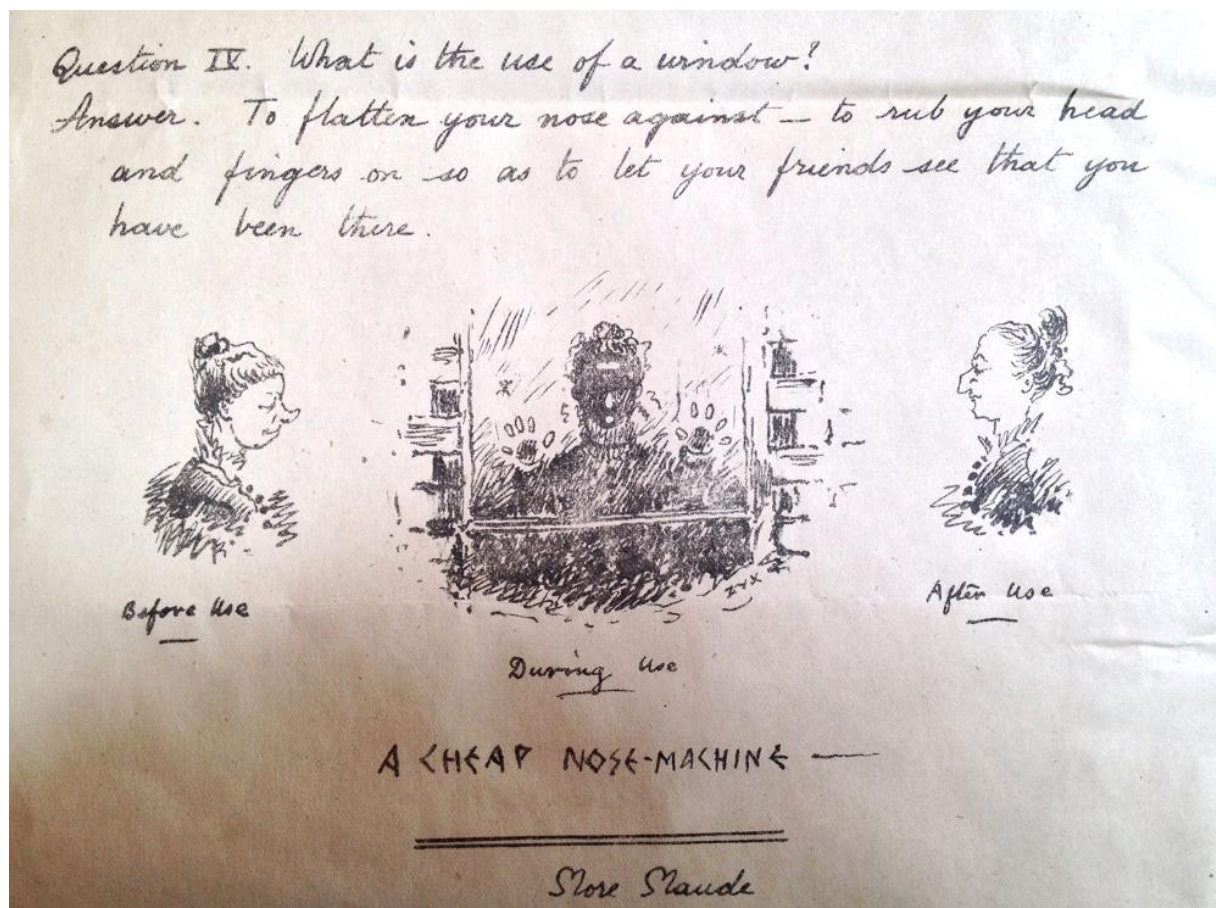


Plate 6

Joke and illustration, reads: Question IV. What is the use of a window?

Answer. To flatten your nose against ó to rub your head and fingers on so as to let your friends see that you have been there. (**Gladiator 1887, 36**)

3.5 Handwritten Letter

Using the GNU Image Manipulation Programme, the otherwise barely visible writing on this piece of paper can be made more readable (**Plates 7 and 8**). It lists the contents of the time capsule and information about the placing of it, and has been signed by Duncan Darroch, the Torridon proprietor, and dated to the 14th of July, 1887, presumably when the time capsule was laid into the wall of the church.

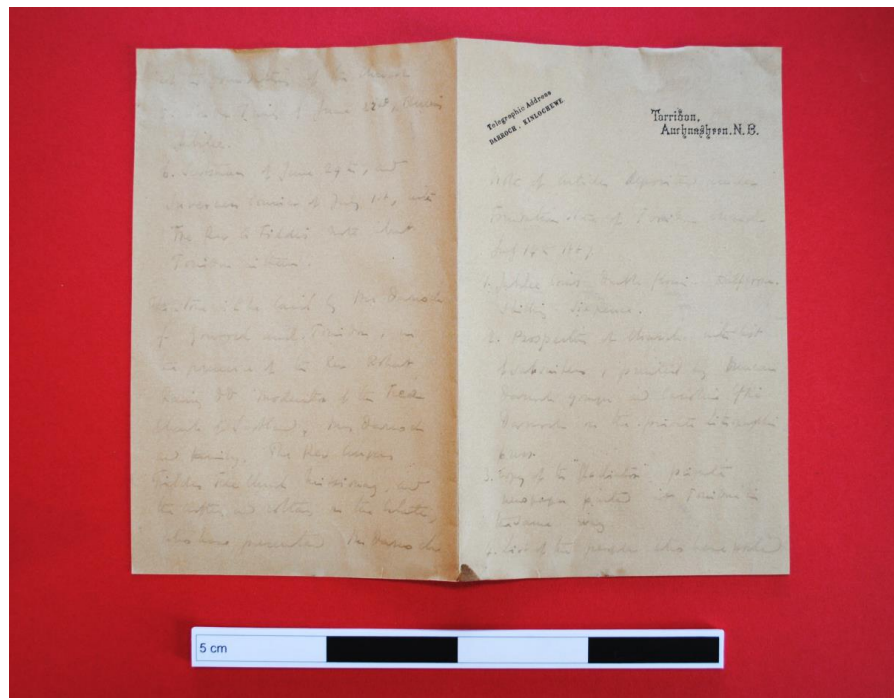


Plate 7 Handwritten letter before image manipulation

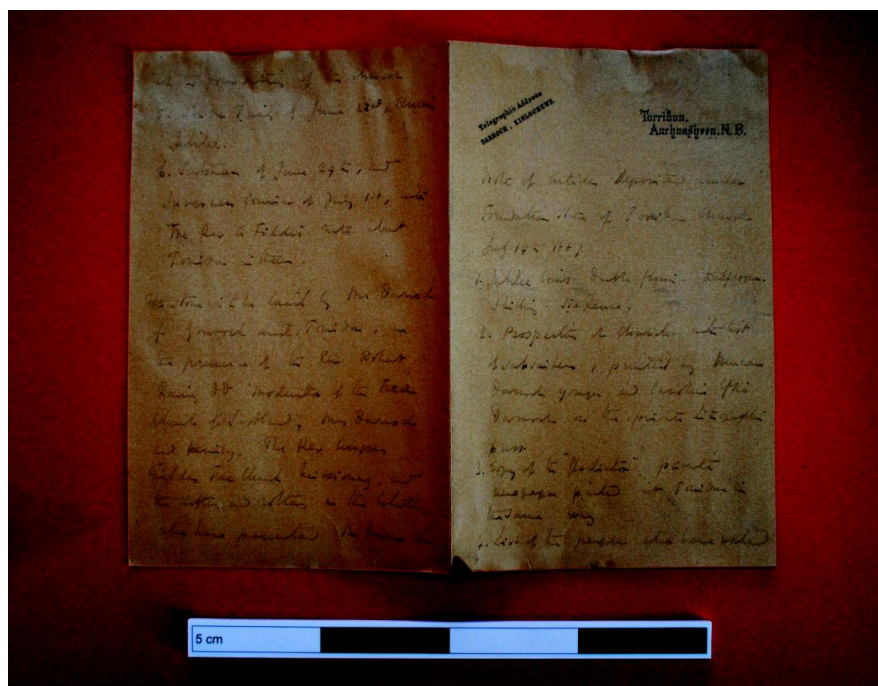


Plate 8 Handwritten letter after image manipulation

3.6 Note of Interest

A similar time capsule is known to have been placed in the Tain Free Church. The minutes of the Church Deacon's Court recording that in the foundations of the building in 1843, a collection of items were to be buried. These were: coins (one of each of the following: sovereign, half sovereign, half crown, shilling, sixpence, fourpence, penny, half penny, and farthing), copies of the *Act of Separation and Deed of Demission*, signatures of the participating ministers and newspapers the *Inverness Courier* and the *North British Advertiser* (Highland Archives 2015, CH3/748/2).

4. Discussion

Whilst the newspapers and coins contribute a much larger picture of the Jubilee celebrations and events of the wider world, it is the *Inverness Courier*, the Church pamphlet, and the *Gladiator* gazette that provides a more poignant insight into Torridon's community in the late 19th century, and creates a meaningful context for the Church. The building was founded with huge effort and dedication by the local people and their proprietor, and would have become an absolutely integral part of the settlement and surrounding area.

A good relationship between Duncan Darroch and his tenants was hinted at in known historic records of lands previously stripped from the local community for sheep farming in 1838 by the previous Estate owner, Alexander MacBarnat, were returned to the small holders by Darroch (Peteranna and Fraser 2015, 6). This relationship is brought into sharper clarity by the letters written to *The Scotsman* and *Inverness Courier* by Rev. Angus Fiddes regarding Darroch's generosity and mission to bring resources and better living standards to the community by way of infrastructure and the undoubtedly much appreciated forfeit of all the rents for the Jubilee year. The record of donations in the Church pamphlet shows that Darroch gave £150 of the required construction sum of £500.

One question raised by the desk based assessment, namely that of why the Church was labelled *Undenominational* on the 1881 Ordnance Survey Map (Peteranna and Fraser 2015, 6), can be answered. The Church pamphlet specifically states that the Church's use was to be free to all of the Protestant faith, but that the Church of Scotland was entitled to the first sermons. There would be no limitations on who could worship there, inside of the Protestant faith:

“That all rights in this building shall be placed in the hands of Darroch Esq Proprietor Torridon in behalf of the majority of the people who may adhere to the Presbyterian form of worship. That the first use of the building shall be for the ordinary service of the people who are all Members and Adherents to the Free Church of Scotland and after that for any Protestant Service.” (Church pamphlet, overleaf)

The Church pamphlet also hints that the community is an exceedingly poor one, and asks for donations to the construction of the building for the local people. Fragments of everyday life concerning the community, such as the Whooping Cough epidemic, provide a picture of life in the Highlands at that time. The listed names in the donations and labour section of the Church pamphlet provide local names and families of the region of the crofting heritage to the modern Torridon.

The collection overall gives a profound glimpse into a moment of Torridon's history of the celebrations of the momentous occasion that was Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee and the influence

of the wider world that stretched right into the northern reaches of the Scottish mainland, the local news and the locally momentous occasion of the construction of a valuable and evidently much sought after Church and meeting place for the community.

5. Concluding Remarks

The time capsule from Coire Church has provided a wealth of information to construct a picture of life in the Torridon area in the 1890s. The Victorian coins and *The Times* and *The Scotsman* newspapers add to an already comprehensive history of Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee, but the *Inverness Courier*, *Gladiator* gazette, Church pamphlet and letter add to a more personal history of Torridon. Without these documents, our knowledge of the Church is severely limited, as is the knowledge of the people who lived there at the time. With this new information, the significance of the Church within the community is brought into greater clarity ó the building was created at great expense and effort of the local people, their considerate proprietor, and the donations of those further away. The importance of a space for not only worship, but general meetings, is huge. The role it played in Torridon's community cannot be overstated and perhaps this will allow greater research to take place in considering the heritage of a community and its dedication in bringing what would be such an integral part of their lives into being.

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