

Dear friends and supporters of 'The Reel',

I am writing to ask for your support in petitioning Orkney Islands Council to adopt 'The Reel' into its Arts, Museums and Heritage Service, whose aims and objectives include the preservation of Orkney's heritage. What 'The Reel' is and does is entirely consistent with the aims and objectives of the service.

You can help now by signing our online petition at <https://www.gopetition.com/petitions/save-the-reel-orkney.html> – please act now.

As well as signing the petition if you are an Orkney resident, you can also write directly to your Councillor on democratic.services@orkney.gov.uk using the subject title "Adopting 'The Reel' into Orkney's Arts, Museums and Heritage Service".

When we started 16 years ago, we had no idea that 'The Reel' would become such an important educational and cultural asset to the Orkney community - home to Orkney's thriving music scene.

It began when we moved back to Orkney after touring all round the world promoting Orkney music from Australia to Finland. We were tired of the road and wanted to put something back to the people of Orkney. We wanted somewhere to teach and were struggling to find a space that could accommodate both of us weekly. For a while we hired rooms at the Pickie Centre, King Street Halls, St Magnus Centre and taught from people's homes. As the teaching demand grew, we struggled to find spaces that we could use regularly (community centres and schools do not allow commercial teaching). When the former Oxy Club on Castle Street came up for rent we thought it would be great, not too expensive to rent and with the added benefit of a waiting area where the students could meet before and after their lessons over a cup of tea and form musical friendships. You can practise your instrument until you're blue in the face at home on your own but music is about socialising, passing on traditions, listening and learning from others.

It was clear when we took entry, in April 2004 that there was a demand for such a space and we were immediately inundated with people wanting to use it for musical activities and teaching. The Accordion and Fiddle Club, which was formed in 1978, having met over the years in various hotels around Kirkwall were struggling with numbers and needing to relocate - "hid wis so cauld, hid teen me feet a whole day tae warm up while me heid wis baked be the wall heaters!"

Since moving to 'The Reel', The Orkney Accordion and Fiddle Club have gone from strength to strength and were recently named 'Community Group of The Year in the MG ALBA Scots Music Awards' and have also recently released their latest CD 'Live from The Reel', recorded at 'The Reel'.

The Orkney Strathspey and Reel Society, formed in 1948, numbers had dwindled to around five members and owing to cut backs at the Town Hall they were asked to change nights or leave (they had met there for 60 years every Thursday night and although they felt they could maybe survive a change of venue they just didn't think they would survive a change of practice night!)

Both these groups have seen players that many folk will remember and recognise as local musical heroes such as Ronnie Aim, Pat Shearer, Hugh Inkster, Davie Eunson to name but a few.

Another group seeking musical refuge was the regular Saturday night tune/session which had been made homeless from its venue after many years in various places across Kirkwall. The tune is now 30 years old and came about when a few of us returned from Shetland Folk Festival and were jealous of their regular sessions in 'The Lounge', Lerwick. A 'Reel Sessions' CD released by Attic Records has been released in that time and features many of the wide array of local musicians who frequently came along. We welcomed them with open arms and despite the flight of stairs they kept coming because of the welcoming atmosphere, that they could meet in the same place every week and that the music came first; they weren't asked to vacate when there was a more profitable event like a wedding, conference or darts/football match. We felt we owed it to them because they had been so inspirational to us in the very early days of our music careers. Like many musicians find across the world, local venues/centres and hotels want the music but only when it suits them – at 'The Reel', the music has always come first.

Over the next five years 'The Reel' at Castle Street became home to over 20 tutors and around 300 students. What started off as an area with an honesty box for a cuppa and biscuit had turned into a full blown café. Before the days of the internet, the lack of a music shop led us to take in some supplies for the students and over time this grew to a fully-stocked music shop and in addition, a local artist who was working in the bar on Saturdays nights during the session started putting on exhibitions with prominent local artists such as Laura Drever, Cam Kennedy and Emma Grieve.

We were full to bursting and when the former tourist information centre at 6 Broad Street was vacated we made a plea for public support to move there. After a mammoth effort which lasted two years, we took entry at the current Reel. We installed a kitchen and painted the entire ground floor (this took Hazel and her husband six weeks across the summer holidays). It wasn't a simple move as we had to make major alterations, but one Sunday morning we asked folk to come and help with the flit and couldn't believe it when dozens of people arrived at six in the morning to help. All ages of folk came along - 12 year old students, their parents, family and friends. One lady in her late 70s filled her peedie box with what she could carry and went back and forth all day. It was quite a sight to see a piano 30 feet in the air on a loadall being transported out of one window and in another across the street! No funding or government support whatsoever, just sheer Orcadian make-do willpower.

Our father built the glass display cabinet in the porch for the music shop display. When we initially looked at taking entry to the building there was a room off the side of the main ground floor space which the tourist information centre had used as an office. We had earmarked this room for our shop but we were then told that despite it being included on the plans, and already connected to the main building, this would involve a separate lease and would incur additional costs. We were already increasing our rent by 4 fold by moving from Castle Street and decided this was a step too far. The council sent in contractors to separate that room from our building – including removing the electricity and fire alarm system and building a new entrance from the neighbouring tenant (the assessor's office at No 8 Broad Street) – this room lay empty for 5 years before we asked if it could be reinstated to our building for our shop – now Orkney's only music shop.

We have some incredible memories at 'The Reel'. Not only have we had over 1000 students (I believe I can remember all of them!) through the door but also around 70 local self-employed tutors have made it their home including 30 apprentice tutors. Many of our students and apprentice tutors have gone on to study traditional music at degree level at conservatoires throughout Scotland, and

some have gone on to become successful professional musicians weel kent on the international stage acting as new ambassadors for Orkney music and culture.

The six teaching rooms upstairs each have a piano notably one has a grand piano gifted to 'The Reel' by Sir Peter Maxwell Davies and another has a baby grand on long term loan from a supporter which was passed down through her family after it was brought on the back of a horse and cart when trying to escape the Nazis from Czechoslovakia, with the shrapnel marks to prove it! The teaching rooms are spread across the top two floors, we took the room names with us from Castle Street – named for musicians, now departed, that had inspired us and had become our friends - The Pat Shearer Room, Davie Eunson Room, Peerie Willie Johnson Room and Hugh Inkster Room.

'The Reel Orkney Tradfest' held annually in the tattie hoicking holidays (October break) started as an intense week of music teaching, fun and concerts with 'The Reel's' regular tutors and has grown to include internationally acclaimed performers and tutors such as; Tim Edey, Arty McGlynn & Nollaig Casey, Freeland Barbour, Martin Donohoe, Liz Doherty, Simon Thoumire, Chris Newman and Karen Tweed (who has since decided to make Orkney her permanent home). It is now a hugely popular and unique addition to Orkney's festival calendar.

'The Reel' has also provided an all year round venue for countless local groups including The Reel Orkney Tradfest, Orkney Strathspey and Reel Society, Orkney Accordion and Fiddle Club, Orkney Recorder Group, Saturday night Traditional Music Sessions, Antony Hodgson Singer Songwriter nights, Tony Leigh Jazz Nights, Orkney Mandolin Group, The Reel Fiddlers and Guitarists, Karen Tweed's Handwriting Class, Karen and Heather's Mixed Instrument Class, Klezmer Group, Young adults with learning difficulties Music Group, Reel Life Foundation Slow Sessions, Step

Dancing Class, Ukulele Class and Orkney Traditional Music Project. Many of these groups operate with no public funding.

It has for the last 16 years become a one-stop-music-shop and archive as we've received dozens of donations of music manuscript and books which people have generously given from their departed loved ones collections. These precious archives would really need to be carefully curated and preserved. I recall one particularly moving moment when a friend called from his bed in the Macmillan Ward asking if we would collect and sell his musical instruments from his house so they could be sold for charity. He passed away soon afterwards.

Running an extremely busy café involves lots of shopping and lots of dirty dishes. I recall regularly going to the café for a break during my 8 hour teaching day and not coming back until I'd helped fix the tills which had gone down or unblocked a drain or fixed the hot water, cleaned the toilet, fixed the broken gate or helped out stressed café staff because the dishwasher had stopped working.... then going back to teaching upstairs.

We have hosted concerts by many internationally acclaimed artists including the International Guitar Night with Lulu Reinhardt and Grammy Award winners Cathy Fink and Marcy Marxer from Washington DC. A vast array of young and old local musicians have performed at The Reel and Ivan Drever makes it a regular venue for his welcome trips home. Other highlights have been the Blues Nights with Ian "Coop" Cooper, Kenny Pirie and friends, Tony Leigh Jazz Trio Nights, Storytelling events, Anthony Hodgson Singer Songwriter Nights, Teen Session with Jen Austin and Louise Bichan (now both working as professional musicians.)

Over the years we've hosted the Orkney Traditional Music Project Summer School evening workshops and been a home for the Orkney International Science Festival Club, St Magnus International Festival Club and The Orkney Folk Festival Club.

When we were approached by the St. Magnus Festival to host their festival club we went a step further and put a tent in the courtyard at the back. We secured a temporary lease for the courtyard and members of the County Show Committee came – it takes several people to put up a tent like this and we mustered 6 strong volunteers to 'lift'. We built a stage from scratch, put in a temporary bar and our Mum made curtains for the backdrop. We sold ice creams, burgers and crepes. It was a massive amount of work when it was all just about ready the festival's Artistic Director appeared and said "now that's what I had in mind for a festival club!"

We've hosted AGM's for local groups including Orkney Camerata, Orkney Traditional Music Project and of course Orkney Strathspey and Reel Society and Orkney and Accordion and Fiddle Club plus The Reel Life Foundation.

Another highlight has been our 'Orkadian Summer Concert Series' which were started nine years ago. Eight concerts have been held every summer, primarily to give talented local entertainers, young and not so young, a performance platform whilst raising money for different local charities each time. These concerts have involved hundreds of local storytellers, musicians, dancers and magicians, giving up their time for free to raise money. Nearly £30, 000 has been raised for charity by performers such as 80 year old accordionist Mona Wood from Sandwick and 10 year old Josh Holderness who did magic tricks. For some, this has been their first live performance and has led to many more. In other cases, it has been the last chance to hear an older generation musician play and have since passed away. Many of these precious concerts have been archived forever on our 'Reel Orkney Music' YouTube channel which has been lovingly and painstakingly put together by our Mum (in between baking industrial amounts of Gluten Free cookies to sell in the café!) The popularity of these concerts was amazing, most often sold out within a day of the tickets going on sale and still we had to turn people away from the door on the night. I recall someone pleading to come in "but we've come all the way from Australia", managing to squeeze them in and then 5 minutes later another group arriving saying "we've come all the way from Washington, please fit us in!"

I can remember once compering a summer concert and having to change the beer keg 5 minutes before the start. We didn't have a beer cellar and it was so warm in there with all the people that it exploded all over me and hit the ceiling – I quickly wiped myself down and went on stage covered. The old building needs constant maintenance and we were always having to fix things, often between doing everything else. This is where the community of The Reel really comes together. The side entrance door handle fell off late on a Thursday night and one of the Strathspey and Reel players, a joiner in his late 70's, did an emergency patch and came back in the morning to finish the job. We purchased 40 folding chairs from Harray Stores Tea Rooms and these were used to form an outside seating area –

our dad has continued to maintain them over the years. With the loss of the bollards outside, which we used to cordon off our eating area The Orkney Men's Shed quickly made some beautiful planters for outside to divide the pavement. There have been literally hundreds of volunteers who have become involved in the Reel, all doing their bit to keep this incredible thing going!

We also went on to bring two 'Shetland Winter Concert Weekends' to The Reel featuring Eart Kyent, Ivor Pottinger, Jenny Hendry and plus two young Shetland Fiddlers of The Year.

At Castle Street we were also very proud to host BBC Radio Orkney's series of 'Live from The Reel' concerts beamed live across the road to their Castle Street studio via a radio receiver balanced on the window sill.

Culture and tradition is about people. When you learn to speak you listen to your parents and grandparents, you pick up on the rhythms and mannerisms in their voices. You learn tunes in the same way. Traditional music is about listening and learning from the older folk – anyone can learn a tune from a book – anyone can read about Orkney's culture and visit the tourist spots. At The Reel you see Orkney's Reel Culture, the people, their generosity, their softly spoken stories, their sense of humour, their tunes, their pride and self-sufficiency. That is what being an Orcadian is all about.

More recently 'The Reel' has become the home of our brand-new charity 'The Reel Life Foundation'. It's 'Musical Instrument Bank' which, aided by The Calor Gas Community Award Fund (we received enough votes to win against other charities across the entire UK), now has over 70 instruments available to loan to folk to try out for free. The foundation also hosts the hugely popular OIC funded free-for-all Slow Sessions which normally take place fortnightly at 'The Reel' throughout the year.

The Reel has been nominated for the MG Alba Scots Music Award Community Organisation of the Year and more recently has received a Trip Advisor "Travellers Choice Award" putting us in the top 10% of the restaurants worldwide in 2020.

It is a beautiful, old, and characterful building belonging to the people of Orkney. Hazel and I have been honoured to be its custodians over the past 11 years but, looking forward, a new financial model is now needed. Many may think of The Reel as just a busy summer café (we have employed over 350 staff since we opened) but the truth is our café trade has been propping up and subsidising the all-important, all year round musical activities that we all cherish. It is all about the music and the people.

In the wake of this horrific global pandemic, without the thriving summer café trade, it is impossible to see how we can continue. We simply cannot meet the rent and upkeep of this beautiful building. We feel it is time for the people of Orkney to carry it forward. We are inviting Orkney Islands Council to save it by formally welcoming it into Orkney's culturally significant gems alongside our museums and Cathedral. 'The Reel' is a community asset and it belongs to the Orkney community, and as a council owned building you have the power to help save it by lobbying the council.

I believe the Reel now needs public funding and new leadership to secure its future as the wonderful living musical heritage site that it has become.

We have done our best – now it is over to you to carry on the musical tradition!

Jennifer Wrigley