THE LAPPAN AND LAIDHAY TRUST

Trustees' Annual Report

for the period ending March 2026

Conserving the sites and buildings of two historical Caithness crofts, the Laidhay and the Lappan — to welcome visitors, present the history of crofting and encourage the revival of small-scale land use in the Scottish Highlands.

1. Charity Details

Charity Name: The Lappan and Laidhay Trust

Scottish Charity Number: SCO54422

Principal Office Address: Laidhay Croft Museum, Dunbeath, KW6 6EH

Type of Governing Document: Constitution of a Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisation (SCIO), registered with OSCR in July 2025

Financial Year: 01/04/2025 to 31/03/2026

2. Trustees

Trustees in Post on the Date of Approval of this Report

The following individuals served as Trustees of The Lappan and Laidhay Trust during the period covered by this report and remain in post on the date of its approval:

James Simpson (Chair): Architect and architectural conservator. James has decades of experience in the conservation of Scotland's historic built environment and has been a driving force behind the establishment of the Trust, bringing deep knowledge of vernacular architecture and Highland heritage.

Lesley Bethune (Vice Chair): Doctor and Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons, with expertise in Governance Review, Strategic Operational Management and Systems Development. Lesley's family owned and operated the Laidhay croft until 1968.

David Sinclair (Secretary): Owner of The Lappan. David's family has held The Lappan on crofting tenure since the mid-nineteenth century. His commitment to finding a worthy future for the site — one that honours its remarkable state of preservation — is central to the Trust's founding purpose.

Ellen Macrae (Interim Treasurer): Researcher and niece of David Sinclair. Ellen brings research expertise and a personal connection to The Lappan's history. Her research expertise is a valuable contribution to the collection of historical information about the two sites and the presentation of information for visitors to the Laidhay Croft Museum.

Graeme Bethune: Caithness-based crofter and owner of Caithness Yarns. Graeme is Lesley's brother and has a strong family connection to the Laidhay croft that stretches back to the nineteenth century. His expertise in traditional Highland textile production is central to the Trust's longer-term vision for skills sharing and cultural revival.

Trustee Recruitment and Appointment

Trustees are appointed in accordance with the Trust's SCIO constitution. The Trust is actively seeking to expand its Board with additional Trustees who bring complementary skills and perspectives, particularly individuals with experience in crofting, community engagement, fundraising, financial management, tourism, or education.

If you are passionate about the heritage of Caithness crofting and would like to contribute to this important project, we would love to hear from you. We welcome expressions of interest from prospective Trustees, volunteers, or anyone who feels they could help advance our mission in any way.

Please contact us at: caithnesscroftcentre@gmail.com

3. Our Mission and Charitable Purposes

The Lappan and Laidhay Trust (L+LT) was established as a Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisation (SCIO) in July 2025. Our mission is:

"To conserve the sites and buildings of two Caithness crofts, the Laidhay and the Lappan, to welcome visitors, present the history of crofting and encourage the revival of small-scale land use in the Scottish Highlands."

We would summarise the project's objectives under **six strategic themes**:

1. **Heritage** – conserve the two historic crofts and their collections.
2. **Museum & interpretation** – tell the story of Caithness crofting and make it accessible to visitors.
3. **Education & skills** – demonstrate and teach traditional crafts, farming and domestic skills.
4. **Working croft** – revive practical small-scale land use using traditional methods.
5. **Tourism & local economy** – attract visitors, provide facilities and generate income.
6. **Future of crofting** – use the Centre as a platform for supporting and exploring viable forms of modern small-scale crofting in the Highlands.

The Trust serves the interests of the local community of Caithness, visitors to the region, those with an interest in Scotland's crofting heritage, and the wider crofting community of the Highlands.

4. Crofting in Caithness: Heritage and Significance

What is a Croft?

A croft is a small parcel of agricultural land — a kind of micro-farm — which may or may not have a house upon it. Crofting is one of the most distinctive and enduring traditions of the Scottish Highlands and Islands, with a legal definition and a system of protections that have shaped the landscape, culture and communities of northern Scotland for well over a century.

Crofts were typically grouped into townships, where each crofter held a small area of their own land and shared access to common ground for grazing and other communal activities. The crofting system was designed to allow people to combine small-scale subsistence farming with income from other activities — fishing, weaving, or other trades — while maintaining security of tenure on the land.

The History of Crofting

In the eighteenth century, the Highlands supported a varied pattern of land holdings, from large estates to smaller tenancies held through intermediary tacksmen. Over time, however, agricultural improvement and the commercialisation of land use led to sweeping changes: communal farms were reorganised, rents were demanded in cash, and many families were forcibly displaced from their land. The clearances of the nineteenth century, accelerated by potato blight in the 1850s, caused severe hardship across the Highlands, including in Caithness.

Decades of civil unrest, sometimes referred to as the Crofters' War, led the government to establish the Napier Commission in 1883 to investigate conditions in the crofting communities. The Commission's work resulted in the Crofters Holdings (Scotland) Act 1886, which created legal definitions for crofters and crofting townships, and provided for the first time the security of tenure that crofting families had long demanded. That basic structure remains the foundation of crofting law to this day.

In Caithness, the crofting era shaped not only the landscape but also the architecture. The characteristic low, stone-built longhouses, thatched with local rushes and designed to shelter people and animals alike, are some of the most distinctive buildings in Scotland. Very few survive in anything approaching their original form. This is precisely what makes the Laidhay and Lappan sites so exceptional.

Why This Heritage Matters

Crofting represents one of the last surviving examples in the British Isles of a communal, small-scale approach to farming and land management that was once widespread. The skills, knowledge, traditions and built structures of the crofting lifestyle are important elements of Scottish cultural heritage, especially so in Caithness.

For visitors travelling the North Coast 500, the opportunity to encounter this heritage at first hand, to step inside a longhouse that has remained essentially unchanged for two centuries, to see the tools that sustained a family through the Highland seasons, or to learn about the crops and livestock that were once worked on this land, is a uniquely powerful experience. It connects people to the place they are visiting, to the people who lived here, and to a way of life that has shaped the character of northern Scotland.

Preserving and presenting this heritage is not merely a matter of conservation. It is an act of cultural recognition: of the communities that endured the clearances, of the resilience of the crofting tradition, and of the ongoing relevance of small-scale land use to the future of the Highlands.

5. The Laidhay and Lappan Sites

Laidhay Croft Museum

The Laidhay Croft Museum stands north of the village of Dunbeath on the East Coast of Caithness, just off the A9 road, which is part of the popular North Coast 500 tourist route. The site was once known as Lydebrae and was the family croft of the Bethunes from around 1842. The buildings were de-crofted in 1968 and subsequently acquired by the Laidhay Preservation Trust, which restored them as a museum in 1974.

The complex comprises three early rush-thatched buildings of exceptional heritage value:



The Laidhay Museum



Road Access



Interior



The Long-house



The Winnowing Barn

The longhouse is a Category A listed Caithness longhouse of the type once common across the far north of Scotland. It dates to the early to mid-nineteenth century and retains the characteristic form of these remarkable buildings: the domestic dwelling at the centre, with a byre, stable and barn at the outer ends. The interior of the domestic portion is furnished and presented to reflect the lived experience of a crofting family. It is one of the finest surviving examples of its type anywhere in Scotland.

The winnowing barn is also Category A listed and is described by experts as probably the sole surviving original structure of its type in Caithness, and perhaps in the entire north Highlands. Its remarkable cruck frame is formed from natural timber trusses supporting rafters made from planks salvaged from a dismantled herring fishing boat, topped with turf and thatched with reed rushes. The barn's design, with openings on both sides to allow the prevailing wind to blow through for winnowing grain, reflects the ingenuity and resourcefulness of its builders. A national newspaper described it shortly after its 1970s restoration as having "outstanding Highland couples, said to be the best examples in Scotland." Tragically, in 2022 the roof partially collapsed following a period of severe weather. Its repair is the Trust's most urgent conservation priority.

The cart shed completes the complex, and together with the longhouse and winnowing barn presents a remarkably complete picture of a working Caithness croft as it would have appeared in the nineteenth century.

The museum was a well-established stopping point for tourists on the A9, with parking, a tearoom and visitor facilities already in place.

The Lappan

The Lappan lies directly opposite Laidhay, on the other side of the A9. It is a traditional Caithness farm complex of outstanding rarity, predominantly dating from the mid-nineteenth century but containing earlier fabric, and has been in the Sinclair family since approximately 1842. The site was recorded by Barbara Hiddleston for the Caithness Archaeological Society in 2008, and in 2022, a Historic Environment Scotland inspection resulted in the buildings being listed at Category B in recognition of their exceptional significance.

The complex includes a farmhouse whose interior has remained essentially unaltered since the early twentieth century, retaining its original layout of four linear rooms — kitchen, parlour and two bedrooms — together with remarkable historic fixtures, fittings, furniture and personal items. The kitchen retains a range stove, a box-bed, and two surviving dressers. The parlour is timber-panelled with remnants of historic wallpaper. This level of survival is exceptionally rare for a building of this type and date.







To the rear of the farmhouse is an earlier longhouse, which pre-dates the present farmhouse and may have origins as a byre-house of the late eighteenth century. It retains moulded stone fireplaces with radiused top corners, suggesting mid-eighteenth century origins, and is roofed in Caithness stone slabs — a technique now rare even in Caithness. This range also contains a stable and a byre, complete with cobbled floor, drainage channel and four stalls constructed from upright Caithness flagstones.



Fireplace with radiused top Corners



Mill Wheel



Threshing Mill

A particularly remarkable feature of The Lappan is its water-powered threshing mill: a large cast-iron water wheel, inscribed "B.B. CLYNE MILLWRIGHT WICK" and dating from the late nineteenth or early twentieth century, connects via a stone mill lade and mill pond to a threshing machine inside the barn. Water mills were not common in Caithness, and this one is further distinguished by its documented secondary use to power a water closet — a use described as exceptionally rare. The tailor's workshop, now roofless but complete to wall-head, is another unique feature of the complex.

The Lappan and Laidhay sites are intervisible from one another across the A9, forming what Historic Environment Scotland describes as "an important surviving group of traditional croft and farm buildings that reflect the vernacular traditions of this area of Scotland." Together, they represent an unparalleled opportunity to present the history of crofting in Caithness to both local communities and visitors.

6. Activities and Achievements in Our First Year

Context: A New Charity

The Lappan and Laidhay Trust was registered as a SCIO in July 2025. This report covers our first year of operation, and it is important to set our activities and achievements in that context. The Trust was established to take on a complex, long-term project of considerable ambition — conserving two nationally significant heritage sites, reopening a visitor attraction, and ultimately developing an educational and community hub for the crofting culture of Caithness. We entered this work without income, without staff, and with significant challenges to address from the outset.

The work of this first year has therefore been foundational: establishing the Trust's legal basis, building relationships with key partners, putting essential governance structures in place, and beginning to secure the funding and permissions needed to act on our objectives. We are proud of what has been achieved in this short time, and we are confident that the groundwork laid this year will enable substantial progress in the year ahead.

Governance and Establishment

The Trust was formally constituted and registered with OSCR as a SCIO in July 2025. A founding Board of Trustees was appointed, bringing together expertise in architectural conservation, crofting, research, textile heritage, and the arts. The Trust's constitution sets out our charitable purposes and the framework within which we operate.

We have engaged legal advisers to progress the conveyancing required to formalise the Trust's ownership of both sites. The Sinclair family is in the process of transferring The Lappan buildings to the Trust, and the Laidhay Preservation Trust, which has been dissolved and is now under the stewardship of the Caithness Voluntary Group, intends to transfer the Laidhay Croft Museum and Tearoom. This process is ongoing and is expected to be concluded in the coming year. Insurance arrangements for the sites have been put in place.

We are actively recruiting additional Trustees to strengthen and diversify the Board. We are particularly seeking individuals with experience in crofting, fundraising, financial management, tourism, community development, and education. We would also welcome volunteers and supporters who can contribute to our work in any capacity.

Conservation of the Laidhay Winnowing Barn

Securing the future of the Category A listed winnowing barn at Laidhay has been our most urgent conservation priority. The barn's roof partially collapsed in 2022, placing this irreplaceable structure at serious and ongoing risk of further deterioration.

We are pleased to report that, through the efforts of the Trust and the vital support of our partners, funding has been secured to begin major repair works to the barn. The Scottish

Historic Buildings Trust (SHBT), with the generous support of the Architectural Heritage Fund and in collaboration with Highland Historic Buildings Trust, Caithness Volunteer Group and Historic Environment Scotland, has been leading a programme of specialist investigation and assessment of the barn. Specialists including Simpson & Brown and Narro Associates will carry out building archaeology and a full condition survey to direct the approach to repair.

The repair programme will restore the barn in keeping with its Category A listing, using original and traditional materials, including local reed for thatching, and employing traditional construction techniques. The intention is to recover as much original fabric as possible, to record the construction process in detail, and to reinstate the roof structure as close to its original form as the surviving evidence allows. Works are expected to proceed over the winter, in time for the reopening of the museum in Spring 2027.

Planning for the Reopening of Laidhay Croft Museum

In parallel with the barn repair, the Trust has begun planning for the reopening of the Laidhay Croft Museum to visitors. A plan is in place for the review, cataloguing and reorganisation of the museum's collections, to enable them to be presented in a more accessible, engaging and informative way. This work will be carried out in advance of reopening, and we anticipate being in a position to welcome visitors and receive donations from Spring 2027.

We are working to improve visitor facilities at Laidhay, including signage, information boards, interpretation materials and an electronic contactless payment facility for donations. We are also pursuing necessary consents for improved road signage and traffic management on the A9 to support safe access to the site. The establishment of a website and social media presence for the Trust is in progress.

Grant Applications and Fundraising

The Trust has submitted grant applications to a range of public and charitable funders to support both the urgent repair of the winnowing barn and the broader redevelopment of the sites. We are grateful to all those who have supported or encouraged these applications. Fundraising efforts are ongoing and the Trust expects to be able to report on further funding secured in the next Annual Report.

Partnerships

We have been fortunate in establishing strong working relationships with a number of key partner organisations from the outset. We are particularly grateful for the ongoing support and guidance of the Caithness Voluntary Group and the Scottish Historic Buildings Trust, without whose help this project could not have been started. We are also in dialogue with Historic Environment Scotland, the Architectural Heritage Fund, and the Pilgrim Trust, and we aim to engage with a wide range of other bodies as our work develops, including the Crofting Commission, Highland and Islands Enterprise, the Highland Council, the University of the Highlands and Islands, the Highland Folk Museum, the National Lottery Heritage Fund, the Dunbeath Heritage Trust, and local community councils.

7. Impact

As a very new charity in its first year of operation, the direct impact of the Trust's work is necessarily limited at this stage. However, the actions taken in this year have already had meaningful consequences for the heritage of Caithness:

- The winnowing barn at Laidhay, described as probably the last surviving original structure of its type in the north Highlands, will not be lost. Funding sources have been secured to repair it to its original state, halting the deterioration caused by the 2022 roof collapse and ensuring that this irreplaceable building is preserved for future generations.
- The Lappan buildings, which have been carefully maintained but without a formal future, now have a charitable owner committed to their long-term preservation and public presentation. There is now a plan and an organisational structure to bring this exceptional site to life.
- The two sites, which have for decades been managed separately, are now on a path to being brought together under a single Trust with a shared vision. This creates an opportunity that is greater than the sum of its parts: a coherent and accessible account of Caithness crofting heritage presented across two adjoining sites.

The most significant impacts of our work lie ahead of us. The reopening of the museum, the restoration of The Lappan, and ultimately the development of the Caithness Crofting Centre will take time, sustained effort and substantial funding. But the foundation has been laid, and we are committed to building on it with energy and ambition.

8. Our Long-Term Vision: The Caithness Crofting Centre

Beyond the immediate priorities of conserving and reopening the existing sites, the Trust has a longer-term ambition: the establishment of a Caithness Crofting Centre that will serve both visitors and the local community of Caithness.

The Caithness Crofting Centre is envisioned as an educational hub, a cultural preservation initiative, and a practical support and skills-sharing centre for the crofting communities of the Highlands. It would build on the foundation of the Laidhay Croft Museum and the Lappan, extending and deepening the visitor experience while offering genuine services and opportunities to local people.

Our vision for the Centre includes:

- A museum and heritage centre presenting the history of crofting in Caithness across both sites, including the remarkable furnished interior of The Lappan croft house, the restored winnowing barn and longhouse at Laidhay, and the extraordinary water-powered threshing mill.
- A working model croft demonstrating traditional practices: growing heritage crops such as oats, barley, bere and potatoes on a rotational basis; keeping livestock; cutting and stacking peats; and demonstrating the water-powered threshing mill and the winnowing barn in use.

- A programme of workshops, demonstrations and courses covering traditional practical skills. We hope to work closely with local producers and craftspeople.
- A café and restaurant showcasing local food, serving meals made with home-grown and locally sourced produce where possible.
- A shop selling local crafts and produce from around Caithness.
- Workspace and studio space for local artists and makers to exhibit and sell their work.
- Short-term visitor accommodation, in existing and appropriately designed new structures, for tourists and those attending workshops and courses.
- Community facilities and services developed in consultation with local people, which may include shared community lunches, meeting spaces, skills courses, and other services that the Caithness community identifies as beneficial.

We are clear that this vision is ambitious, and that some elements of it may require revision as plans develop. What matters is the end goal: a Centre that is genuinely useful to the people of Caithness, authentically rooted in the heritage of the place, and capable of offering visitors a rich, memorable and educational experience.

The development of the Caithness Crofting Centre will be undertaken in close consultation with the local community. We are committed to listening to what local people want and need, and to developing our plans in a way that reflects those priorities.

9. Have Your Say: Community Feedback

The Lappan and Laidhay Trust exists to serve the communities of Caithness as much as it does visitors from further afield. We want to hear from local people about what they would like to see happen at the Lappan and Laidhay sites, and about what services, facilities or opportunities they feel would make the greatest difference to their community.

Whether you have memories of the sites, ideas for what the Caithness Crofting Centre could offer, skills or knowledge you would like to share, or simply thoughts on how we can best serve the community, we want to hear from you.

Please share your feedback using our online form:

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSfU0h4yzOZnFraOVM5EQLqSbTawmKErvXKKB_FYHT9rM5J7jg/viewform?usp=publish-editor

You are also welcome to write to us or contact us directly at:

caithnesscroftcentre@gmail.com

10. Financial Matters

Accounts

The Lappan and Laidhay Trust was registered as a charity in July 2025 and this report covers the Trust's first period of operation. As the Trust had no income during this period and only obtained a bank account after the close of the 2025-2026 financial year, it is exempt from the requirement to submit accounts to OSCR for this first year. A full set of accounts will be prepared and submitted for the Trust's first full financial year.

Reserves Policy

The Trust does not currently hold financial reserves. As the Trust develops and begins to generate income, the Trustees will establish a formal reserves policy in line with OSCR guidance. The policy will set out the level of reserves considered appropriate to ensure the Trust can continue to operate and meet its obligations, and will be reviewed annually.

Donated Services and Facilities

During this first year, the Trust has benefited significantly from donated time, expertise and support from its founding Trustees, from the Scottish Historic Buildings Trust, from the Caithness Voluntary Group, and from other advisers and supporters who have contributed their time and skills without charge. The Trust is deeply grateful for this generosity, which has been essential to our ability to make progress during this early phase.

11. Plans for the Year Ahead

In the coming year, the Trust's priorities are:

- Completing the conveyancing necessary to establish the Trust's formal ownership of both the Lappan and Laidhay sites.
- Completing the repair of the Laidhay winnowing barn and reopening the Laidhay Croft Museum to visitors in Spring 2027.
- Reviewing, cataloguing and reorganising the museum's collections to create a more accessible and engaging visitor experience.
- Appointing a part-time Project Manager to lead the day-to-day development of the project.
- Establishing the Trust's website, social media presence and a Friends of the Trust organisation to build public support and raise funds.
- Commissioning detailed topographical, architectural and archaeological surveys of both sites and preparing conservation and development plans.
- Developing a business plan for the short term and a strategy for the longer-term development of the Caithness Crofting Centre.
- Continuing to fundraise and apply for grants from public, charitable and private sources.

- Engaging with the local community of Caithness to understand their priorities and incorporate their views into our planning.
- Expanding the Board of Trustees to strengthen the Trust's governance and capacity.

12. Approval of this Report

This Trustees' Annual Report was approved by the Trustees of The Lappan and Laidhay Trust on:

[DATE OF APPROVAL] 7th October 2026

And signed on their behalf by:

James Simpson

Name: James Simpson
Position: Chair, The Lappan and Laidhay Trust
[DATE] 19th October 2026