**1997: Community Land Unit established**

***Intro (Gill Murray):*** *The following clip is taken from an oral history interview with Dr John Watt. John worked as a community co-op field officer in the early 1980s and continued working at the Highlands and Islands Development Board through its transition to Highlands and Islands Enterprise in the 1990s. In 1997 he set up and coordinated the Community Land Unit. Here he provides wonderful insight into the context for the Unit, referencing the earlier community land buyouts on the Herbridean islands of Eigg and Assynt, in the north-west Highlands, and also some of the political context around devolution and the land reform movement in Scotland at the time. I hope you enjoy the clip and thanks for listening.*

**John Watt:** There’s interesting historical coincidences, Eigg happened in 1997, there were a lot of false starts before 1997, but 1997 it culminated. That coincided, of course, with the election of a Labour Government. Tony Blair’s Labour Government in May 1997. June 12th was when Eigg was officially handed over and the new minister of state for the Highlands and Islands, Brian Wilson, who had been elected and was based as a Minister of State in the Scottish Office, had been a long time land reform campaigner. And he, at the Eigg event, he indicated to HIE chief executive at the time, that communities shouldn’t have to go through the same process as Assynt and Eigg had done to be able to acquire their land, and this agency should be able to help communities to do this, financially and/or advice and support and all the rest of it. Rather than them having to struggle both financially and in terms of expertise to get to this stage. And the chief executive of HIE came back from the Eigg launch and said, we’re going to have to do a bit more on this front. And I suppose, I kind of volunteered, because I could see that it was gaining momentum and that it was quite important in the Highlands, so I was given the task, at least on a part time basis, to see what else we could do to help. And were there any other places that were thinking of doing this at the time, that we could intervene with an offer to help. And it happened that Knyodart was thinking about this at the time. And again it’s a long and colourful and interesting story, but we were able to offer Knoydart some money to as a pre-acquisition grant to do some of the early work, including a fundraising effort, and then eventually to put some money into the acquisition. After that, it was seen that this was not quite a movement at that stage, but there was certainly a momentum, and because Eigg and Asynt had broken the mould and Knoydart was following behind other communities were saying, we could do this. So I’ll cut a long story short, I was eventually given the job to set up a team to do this. Initially the team was just one or two and me, because we weren’t sure what the demand was going to be. Because I’d been through the community co-op field officer process, I really effectively designed it along similar lines. That we would have funds, pre-acquisition funds that would help communities that were looking at this but couldn’t really afford to spend money on lawyers or accountants or title searchers, or fundraising. It would be easier if they had a small pot of money, a small pot of money, to take forward some of these initial enquiries into feasibility, and we got a small amount of money to assist communities to, to grant aid them to buy land. And a couple of people to go out to help people to do this, as did community co-op field officers. Very similar, they were community land field officers. And that basically grew and then along came the [Scottish] Parliament and a very strong political support, suddenly, for land reform, which had never really been there before, especially when we were effectively run from Westminster. And Donald Dewar, as the first First Minister was very keen on this, and Brian Wilson behind the scenes was a very active politician, and more money was made available and our team was enhanced and eventually we had 12 people, at its peak, working for the Community Land Unit, working all over the Highlands, and at that stage only the Highlands, to take forward initiatives all over the area looking at all different types of land. Big estates, yes, islands, yes, but also woodlands, forestry areas, smaller bits of land for amenity purposes, so that was basically the establishment of the Community Land Unit in the late 1990s, early 2000s. Then a budget through the National Lottery and then a piece of Legislation in 2003 through the Land Reform Act. So suddenly, from something that was very peripheral in terms of state agency intervention, it became quite high profile and other successful buy outs emerged over the next few years.