**1985: The Association of Community Enterprise in the Highlands and Islands (ACE Hi) established**

***Intro (Gill Murray):*** *This clip is an extract from an oral history recoding made in October 2020 with Iain Clark, John Watt, Chas Ball and Tor Justad discussing the development of the Association of Community Enterprise in the Highlands and Islands, known as ACE Hi. After the HIDB withdrew direct funding in 1983, ACE Hi supported the development of community enterprise in the Highlands and Islands. The discussion captures the interchange of people and ideas that sustained community enterprise in the late 1980s and into the 1990s, as the two distinct movements, community co-ops in the Highlands and Islands and community business in the lowlands shared knowledge and know-how under the banner of community enterprise. The discussion of how ACE Hi used the latest technology to provide training across the Highlands and Islands electronically in the 1980s and 1990s, was a timely reminder of the issue of keeping people and connected in remote and rural areas, and the expertise developed to overcome these challenges in the Scottish Highlands and Islands long before the lockdowns of 2020 that were foremost in our minds at the time of recording.*

*You hear first from Iain Clark: Worked as a youth community development worker in London, before moving to the Highlands in 1981 and establishing the Fyrish Trust in 1982. Iain became the first development worker employed at ACE HI in 1985.*

*The other voices you’ll hear in this clip are myself, John Watt and Tor Justad:*

*John Watt: Was an HIDB community co-op field officer for the Highland mainland and Argyll, in the late 1970s. Continuing to work at HIDB through the transition to HIE in 1991, he held various posts including Senior Economist, Head of the Community Land Unit, and finally as Director of Strengthening Communities.*

*Tor Justad: Worked as Area Community Worker for Shetland Islands Council, between 1978 and 1987 supporting voluntary organisations, co-operatives and social enterprises in the North Mainland of Shetland. He was the first Chair of the Association of Community Enterprises in the Highlands and Islands (ACE-HI), from 1986-1987, supporting community enterprises across the region.*

*Enjoy the clip. Thanks for listening!*

**Iain Clark:** I moved up to the Highlands in 1981, having visited here several times with close friends, and I decided to move up here in 1982 because I was interested the nature of some of the communities I had become involved in on my previous visits, mainly around music and so forth. And for the previous ten years I had actually been a professional youth community worker both in the statutory and also in the voluntary sectors. So I came up to the Highlands with that sort of background, interested in the idea of doing something in the community that basically led to the establishment of an organisation called the Fyrish Trust based in Evanton, and we subsequently found out this was the first community business in the Highlands and Islands. I wasn’t even aware of community co-op movement, I had no idea until John [Watt] and Roy [Pedersen] walked into my office into Evanton one day and introduced themselves, and I thought they were from Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs and was slightly thrown by that. But anyway…

**John Watt:** We had nice ties in those days.

**Iain Clark:** Yes, we didn’t wear ties so that’s why we felt somewhat intimidated by men walking in with ties. But anyway, yes, so basically they came in and said, look, did you know that there is this movement to do with community co-operatives around the Highlands and Islands -and of course my interest was immediately stimulated by that. But also I remember John saying, I think what you’re doing here is a community business and they’ve already been set up in the central belt and you need to speak to a chap called John Pearce. And then within a month or so, John came up to Evanton to meet with me, was obviously very interested in what we were doing. Mainly we were involved in the very early youth training schemes here in the Highlands. In fact, we were the first, I believe, voluntary organisation and we were using the profits generated from that to basically, if you like, help fund the charitable activities which were around music and the arts and suchlike. And I’d been involved in the very first MSC scheme ever set up in London several years prior to that, the old youth opportunities programme. So having met John and Roy, I started to get more interested in what was going on and then they came back and said, there’s this thing called ACE-HI. Now I honestly can’t remember whether ACE-HI had been established just prior to John and Roy’s coming to speak to me? It might well have been. But there was nothing there except probably a constitution and a committee, because I think vaguely I remember being interviewed by a group of people, Tor [Justad] was one of them for sure, and then as a result of that, I was taken on and I set up the first office, got in a part-time administrator and really got the ball rolling. Got to know some of the other people in the HIDB’s office in Inverness like Bob Storey and I’m not sure whether Callum Davidson was working at that time. I think it probably was a little bit later on. So really I was involved with setting up the first community business in the Highlands from 1982 to I think 1985 and at that point I then started working with ACE-HI and looking at ways of providing support and training to all the community economic development organisations that were around, principally the community co-ops.

**Gill Murray: Brilliant, thank you. What a fascinating career, I’ll really have to ask you more about that sometime.**

**Tor Justad:** May I just mention that was the very first time I think I’d ever seen a laptop was when Ian [Clark] appeared with a laptop at the bar, I think it was, that we were meeting in at the time, so that shows how technology has moved on since then. Sorry, I just had to mention that.

**John Watt:** And it was a Toshiba, I can still remember it.

**Iain Clark:** So can I. I think from Gillian’s point of view, it is quite interesting in the story of ACE-HI was the use of computer communications to link up remote communities and we were certainly one of the pioneering organisations in the UK, thanks to John Brydon basically twisting my arm and saying if you don’t get on board with this, we’re going to get left behind in the Highlands, not realising of course that we were so far ahead of anybody else in terms of using computer communication. This was before the internet days and John [Watt] walked into the office with a thing called Ruartel from Canada. But it was a key part, I think, of some of the developments that took place because as a result of that, we basically engaged a company which involved Peter Peacock at the time in developing training materials for community enterprises across the Highlands and Islands, and some of that training was actually delivered by computer communications. Each one of the committee members in ACE-HI and there was one from each of the regions were given a very, very ancient Amstrad laptop with one of those old modems that you had to set the dial tone and, boy, how we managed to actually get the thing to work I have no idea, but it did, and it was a revolution at the time.

**Gill Murray: That’s brilliant. That’s really interesting to know. And so I’m just thinking what’s the most useful thing to go back to here. Maybe before we go into the running of ACE-HI, because if I’m right, ACE-HI was originally funded by the HIDB wasn’t it? Could we maybe just go back one step…Tor, was Iain right in thinking you were one of the people that interviewed him for this?**

**Tor Justad:** Indeed, I was elected, for my sins, as the first chair of ACE-HI, so we then had our founding meeting in Staffin on Skye where we were given a personal cheque by Glen Buchanan who was the secretary or chair of Community Business Scotland and Strathclyde Community Business, and that was our starting funding was the £100 personal cheque which I hope he got refunded eventually. It was his personal money that started ACE-HI. And so then as Iain said, we did have a committee which was representative of all the areas where there were community co-ops at the time and we gradually put together a constitution and we then received funding to recruit our first development officer who was Iain. Yes, so I do hold myself responsible for recruiting Iain into the family of community co-ops which we were delighted about because he knew a lot certainly about technology at that stage than any of us did, and all his background experience was really useful to us at the time.