

Alan Beavitt

Born 1945. Violin maker in the Scottish west highlands.
Available online at www.livesretold.co.uk



Contents

1. Making Violins
2. Buying a Violin
3. Living in Scoraig

1. Making Violins

The following account of his life by Alan Beavitt was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the Strad website at www.strad.com.



Alan Beavitt's workshop at Scoraig, in the west highlands of Scotland.

It all started the year before I left school: I found a book in the school library about making musical instruments and I decided I'd have a go at making my own. It quickly grew into a hobby, and I seriously thought about turning it into a career as soon as I left school.

But I was also interested in science, and when I wrote to someone at the violin shop Hill & Company asking whether they would advise me to go into violin-making or science, they said, 'Science every time!' In those days artisans were very poorly paid and low in the social order, whereas science was the future.

So I became an experimental physicist for a few years, while continuing to make instruments in my spare time, learning mostly from books. Then one day, while I was living in London, I met someone from Scorraig. I'd never heard of the place, but I've always had a craving for adventure and I'd long had a dream of building my own house.

So when he offered me some land up here, about 44 years ago, I moved up, built my house and workshop and became a violin maker - part time at first, then eventually full-time.

You might think Scorraig is a terrible place to set up a violin shop. There's no road access. You can only get here by boat or by walking along a mountain path. There are only 70 people living here and when I first arrived there was only one telephone box in the village - nobody had their own phone. But there is a certain mystique about a violin maker living in the wild.

In the early days I met a famous violin teacher who sold his Amati and bought one of my instruments. Then two of his associates from the Royal Northern College bought my instruments and recommended me to their students. In 1986, I won the Facta Britannia violin maker competition. So life was pretty easy for a while. Nowadays I sometimes get clients walking into the settlement along the mountain path to visit my shop.

There was a time, in the 1980s and 1990s, when I was making nothing but Baroque violins, thanks to the boom in Baroque orchestras. But now I mix them up with modern instruments. I bought a tree in the Dolomites so I have a lifetime supply of spruce and I sometimes use Scottish Sycamore which has this traditional ripple pattern that you see on violin backs, sides and necks. I planted some Scottish sycamore trees when I first came here, and, although the trees are quite big now, it will be another fifty years before they're big enough to use for instrument-making.



Alan Beavitt photographed in his workshop by John Linton.

Scorraig has a friendly community: since we're quite isolated, we depend on each other quite a lot, and when I first arrived with my wife, we were accepted pretty quickly. There's one primary school in the village, the one that was in the news recently because its only two teachers are leaving.

At one point there were only two children in the entire school which was rather alarming, but now there are quite a few babies and toddlers in the community, so the future is looking promising. I taught violin there for 28 years, and one of them became a professional viola player, who now lives in the United States.

Sometimes I work 14 hours a day, but other days I like to mix it up: if it's sunny I might spend the time gardening, or playing music, or I might take my little boat out in order to do some shopping. I've got a workshop out across the garden with a wonderful view across the sea loch to distant mountains that are snowcapped in winter. It's not a life for everybody: it can be pretty wild here in the winter. But I've got a lot music and a wood-fuel stove in my workshop, so I'm a happy man.

2. Buying a Violin



A violin by Alan Beavitt.

The following description of buying an Alan Beavitt violin was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the website of Cardiff Violins Ltd at www.cardiffviolins.co.uk. It was written by Jennifer Kelly of Derbyshire.

I stumbled upon Cardiff Violins by chance when searching online for a Baroque violin many years ago. I was given plenty of helpful advice and details of a couple of instruments in a series of email exchanges and phonecalls, but finding time to spend a day in Cardiff was impossible with an intense work, travel and family schedule.

Fastforward to 2021 and the pandemic, when all foreign travel was suspended and I found more time to practise. Suddenly the time felt right to ‘scratch the Baroque itch’ again, and this time I was keen not to delay. I was buying the instrument with money given to me by my parents, and wanted my father to see and hear the violin before his health deteriorated further. Cécile suggested that rather than waiting for lockdown to end, perhaps I could try a couple of instruments at home.

Initially I was apprehensive about making such a big decision with no help from experts, and unable to seek advice from musician friends in lockdown, but Cécile provided all the guidance and encouragement I needed. The next day, two beautiful Baroque violins and three bows were delivered to my home in the most incredible packaging. I spent hours playing both instruments and my feelings changed every day. It was so difficult to choose between them, but help from Cécile and Angharad was always only an email or phonecall away, asking probing questions and giving wise advice.

When I needed a little extra time to make my decision, they were very accommodating and patient, as were my family and musician friends on the end of Zoom calls listening to endless renditions of Biber! Finally I chose an Alan Beavitt Baroque violin – so responsive and sweet sounding, yet able to project in a larger space. I can't wait to play it to my parents as soon as I am able to see them.

I am so grateful to Cécile and Angharad for their expertise, generosity of time and patience, and wouldn't hesitate in recommending Cardiff Violins to others – these people make dreams come true!

3. Living in Scoraig



The old lighthouse at Scoraig (moved to this site and converted to a museum), and in the background a locally designed wind turbine.

The following description of life on Scoraig was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the www.scoraig.com website.

Wonderful Teaching Opportunity in Stunning Highland Location



Scoraig Primary School on the banks of Little Loch Broom.

What: Full-time Class Teacher for Scoraig Primary School

When: As soon as you can start - Winter 2015

Where: Scoraig Peninsula, Little Loch Broom, IV23 2RE

Who: Someone with an adventurous spirit and a resourceful nature who would embrace living close to the elements in a remote off-grid community.



Scoraig Primary main classroom.

The Basics



Scoraig Peninsula from the summit of Beinn Ghobhlach looking out to the Summer Isles.

Scoraig Primary School is located on a remote peninsula on the north west coast of Scotland that is accessed either by small open topped boat or by coastal path as where we live there is no road. The community is currently a population of about seventy people spread across five crofting townships, Scoraig, Lotts, Carnoch, Ruigh Reabhach and Achmore.

The primary school roll currently has five pupils and there are four toddlers who will soon be of nursery age and more babies on the way. We are seeking a class teacher to come and live and work in our unique community.

The Community

It is difficult to describe how special Scoraig is to anyone that hasn't yet visited. The peninsula was resettled in the early sixties by a motley crew of folk with a desire to live in an alternative way to the mainstream. For lots of residents this has meant building their own house, finding their own water supply, and powering their homes from wind, water or sun. Lots of people grow their own veggies, have chickens, some have sheep and pigs as well as a few cows.

Between us the community has a remarkable skill set with residents who are stone masons, joiners, a violinmaker, a tarot card reader, an archaeologist, a jeweller, several artists, a fisherman, market gardeners, a nurseryman/wild forager, a wind turbine expert and much, much more. Scorracks can turn their hands to just about anything.

The community has post delivered three times a week, a community building with village hall and kitchen, a retired lighthouse in the woods, a boat shed, a mountain (Beinn Ghobhlach), a community association, a grazing committee and a charity that looks after some community assets and events.

There is no shop, though a local shop will deliver supplies with the post. There is no pub, so there is lots of socialising. There is no road though there is a bumpy dirt track that runs along the peninsula that is maintained by the community. There is no doctor so in a medical emergency it's a helicopter ride out. There is no cinema/theatre/gallery so we make our own entertainment.



From left to right: launching the post boat at the jetty, crossing the loch looking back to Scoraig, and wheelbarrowing along the track.

Accommodation

Scoraig has its own architectural vernacular as most houses have been built by their owners or previous occupants. There is often an emphasis on practical solutions rather than smooth slick finishes which gives many dwellings particular charm. There are about forty households on the peninsula of varying sizes and styles. Currently there are three crofts for sale, a 5.5 acres croft with a 3-4 bedroom recently-built house in Ruigh Reabhach, Ali Shornets a traditional, decrofted crofting cottage and garden,

set in 2 acres of land and Michel's Croft a 2 bedroom wooden house with 1.4 hectares of land.



Properties for sale - 8 Ruigh Reabhach, Ali Shornets and Michel's Croft.



Driftwood for rent.

If you don't fancy buying there is a community built cottage for rent 'Driftwood'. It was built to house the secondary school teacher when there was one on the peninsula and it has since been rented as a holiday let for visitors to the community. It has a lovely open plan living room and kitchen complete with shiny red rayburn stove that heats the space and the water. Downstairs there is a double and a single bedroom and a couple of spaces in the loft that currently have 5 single beds. It has a bathroom with shower, bath and flushing loo. There's a washing machine, fridge and freezer and it is just 5mins walk from the school.

Transport



Transport can be interesting depending on the weather. There are a few vehicles on the peninsula, jeeps, old pick ups and fergie tractors etc, quite a few people have quad bikes to get around and there are a few mountain bikes too but mostly there's a lot of walking goes on so wheel barrows and wellie boots are a must. Also essential are a good set of oil skins to keep you dry in all weathers – we do get all weathers! As far as crossing the loch, the post boat goes every Monday, Wednesday and Friday so you can catch a lift with that, or hire it yourself for a specific time, or use the shared mooring boat, or of course bring your own boat or catch a lift with someone that is crossing.

We have a good system for matching people and ferries though high tide is always the most likely time. (It should be noted that very occasionally it's too wild and windy to cross). If you don't fancy the loch crossing you can always walk in passed gorgeous waterfalls and scenery – it takes just over an hour between the road end and the start of the community – add another half hour to get to the primary school and the same again to get to the Scoraig Jetty. Again like the loch crossing this walk can be a very different experience depending on the weather.



Little Loch Broom on a stunning calm morning looking up to An Teallach.

Shopping

Shopping can be a total mission. Most people do their main shop in either Dingwall or Inverness where there is pretty much every shop you might want. Tesco do a 'click and collect' service there, which means we can nip in and out pretty quickly and also pick up each others shopping too very easily. Highland Wholefoods will deliver to the Badluarach Jetty as will suppliers of coal and gas etc.

But of course everything has to be brought either across the loch in an open top boat so waterproofing is always something to be considered or if you prefer to walk, carried in on your back along the track where then shopping by weight very quickly becomes key. And once you are across the loch or in the track you've then got to get it to your door and of course depending on where you stay this can have its own challenges too.

All that being said there is nothing like having a fully stocked cupboard once you get home and the creativity in the kitchen that comes of not being able to pop out for something you have forgotten can be total genius.

To find out more



So if you think you might be up for the challenge come and visit us to find out what all the fuss is about. Contact us at scoraig.teaching.group@gmail.com or phone Zoë on 07512 447082 or Jo on 07941348661. For all the official information about the job visit myjobscotland.gov.uk.

Previous Teacher Testimonials

We have asked some of the previous teachers from Scoraig to send us a few lines about their experience of teaching and living here so you can get an idea of what it might be like straight from the horses mouth.

Nuala Keller

I was lucky enough to teach at Scoraig for nearly ten years. The landscape and scenery are stunning - impressive outdoor learning opportunities, and the people creative and quirky like nowhere else. They believe in their children and the important role of the school at the centre of the community. There is always a helping hand and volunteers to offer expertise in many fields: helping with school plays and concerts, speaking Gallic, setting up submarine robots to investigate sea life, supporting fair trade enterprise projects, joining in mad sports like sack races and quidditch matches, accompanying on school trips... There are small pupil numbers and mixed ages, allowing the atmosphere of learning to be like that of a family.

The older children learn how to be excellent buddies and responsible citizens. The younger pupils have role-models to look up to, who set high standards. It is a perfect environment for really getting to know your class, find out what makes them tick and present the curriculum in a way that engages and stimulates. I found that there was plenty of space for each child to tell their tale, take their place and grow into their own person. It is possible to be informal whilst maintaining mutual respect and having lots of fun, to teach guitar in one corner whilst another group work on maths across the room.

Every time I go back to Scoraig, I am bowled over by what amazing young people Scoraig nurtures. They are articulate, independent, responsible, kind, ambitious and have wonderful minds of their own. I feel privileged to have had the opportunity to work with some of them. Scoraig is a place where a teacher can blend academia with the natural world and real life learning, a place for creativity and thinking a little outside the box, (PE lessons!).

Although there are some slightly tricky logistics, eg shopping, there really are people who will help. When you're purchasing your wand at Diagon Alley before heading for the Scoraig Sea Taxi, don't forget your wellies and wheelbarrow! Have fun!

Jan Grigg

I came to Scoraig with husband James and our 3 young children in 1998 to run the Secondary School. We were welcomed literally with open arms and invited into the heart of the community.

We were invited to every party and celebration and got to know everyone well within a short time. Scoraig is a rare community, with great characters and you will be entertained and fascinated by a way of life that you will not find in many places. The job was demanding and challenging, but hugely rewarding and satisfying. The place itself is a stunning raw, wild place and demands a degree of physical and emotional stability to cope with life on the West.

If you are up for a challenge of a lifetime and enjoy meeting new people, go and visit and see for yourself what Scoraig is about. I don't regret a moment of my life in Scoraig, and still feel part of the community and life there.

Best wishes Jan Grigg Headteacher Scoraig Secondary School 1998-2000.

Annie Scott

My name is Annie Scott. I was the Head Teacher of the Primary School in Scoraig in 1999. The school had 9 pupils P1 -P7. I enjoyed it tremendously and developed my own skills as a teacher. I made many friends and it was fun!

Education is top of the agenda in the community in Scoraig and because the numbers in the school are small, there is time for the children's talents, skills and aspirations to develop and flourish. I had thought that being a sole teacher might be a bit lonely but not at all. The support and enthusiasm from the parents and the whole community is terrific.

So many talented people are willing to share their skills and their time with the children and in every area of the curriculum, science, maths, art, music, languages.... In addition, there are always people helping out in so many other ways, baking, singing, school trips, school plays etc.

There is no doubt of the unique character of Scoraig, and it attract lots of visitors, often from abroad and they too volunteer their time. Even Ross County footballers are willing to come over to help! So lonely it is not.

I was lucky enough to have an HMI Inspection there. Lucky, because it has to happen sometime in a career and I was glad it was there. I had such support from the parents and everyone else and the HMI inspectors were so very impressed with the children; their levels of attainment, friendliness and confidence.

Teaching in Scoraig is an adventure and even though sometimes the weather can be inclement, it will always be a most memorable teaching post!

Annie.

Deirdre Carney

I arrived in Scoraig with my family at the end of 1999. It was my first head teacher post and I was full of excitement and expectation. My hopes for the job were met and exceeded over the next few years. I met the most interesting, positive and engaged group of children I have taught. It was a constant pleasure to be with them and to teach in such a beautiful, stimulating and rich environment.

We explored the river and shore, school archives and archaeological remains. Scoraig seemed made to enable the best kind of inter-disciplinary learning. Some of my very happiest memories of my time at the school are of the school plays which the children created and entertained their friends and families with. It was wonderful to see the total involvement of all the children which the small numbers made possible.

Though I was sole teacher, I always felt sure of the enthusiastic support of the community. The people of Scoraig had an amazing range of skills and expertise and came to share them with the children. My own children look back on their years in Scoraig with great fondness. I can't think of anywhere where young people can grow up with so much freedom among such neighbourly, convivial people. I was very sad when family circumstances made me leave Scoraig. I certainly spent the happiest years of my teaching life there.

Deirdre Carney Head Teacher 1999-2003
