



MAKING
LIFE
BETTER

High Life Highland

HIGHLAND ARCHIVE SERVICE

Annual Report 2025-26

JUNE 2026

Foreword

This has been a positive and productive year for the Highland Archive Service, with sustained growth across our core activities and increasing engagement with communities throughout the Highlands and beyond.

Across 2025/26, we saw a 12% increase in in-person visits and a 19% rise in digital engagement, alongside significant growth in participation, with outreach events welcoming 1,884 additional attendees. These figures demonstrate the continued relevance of our collections and the expanding ways in which people access them. Our audiences remain diverse, engaging both locally and from further afield. While the majority of users (58%) are based in the Highlands, we also reached audiences across Scotland (10%), the wider UK (7%), and internationally, particularly the USA (9%), Australia (8%), and Canada (4%).

Collaborative projects such as *Following the Fish* (page 7) and *Curious Travellers* (page 16) amongst others, have connected our collections with new audiences through creative and community-led work. Alongside ongoing engagement with schools and community groups, these initiatives ensure our collections remain dynamic, accessible, and relevant.

Alongside this outward-facing work, essential activity in collections care has continued, including conservation treatments and collections audits, strengthening the long-term preservation and accessibility of our holdings.

These achievements are a testament to the professionalism and commitment of our staff and volunteers, supported by High Life Highland, The Highland Council, and our partners.

Looking ahead to 2026/27, we will build on this strong foundation through a number of key developments, including the re-accreditation of the Caithness Archives, as part of Nucleus, and the migration to a new collections management system and refreshed online portal. We also look forward to further collections development through externally funded initiatives such as the Margaret Moodie and Dogstar Theatre cataloguing projects and participation in the Seanchas Beò | Living Lore artist-in-residence at Skye and Lochalsh Archive Centre.

Building on this strong performance, we look ahead with confidence as we continue to preserve, share and promote the documentary heritage of the Highlands, helping communities to connect with their past and supporting High Life Highland's aim of Making Life Better.

Alison Mason
Highland Archivist



Highland Archive Service Team

28

Members of Staff

4 archive centres across the Highlands

**Highland Archive and Registration Centre, Inverness
Nucleus: The Nuclear and Caithness Archives, Wick
Skye and Lochalsh Archive Centre, Portree
Lochaber Archive Centre, Fort William**

**28 staff | 10+ specialist roles
33 Volunteers**

Expertise includes:

**Archivists · Records management · Conservation ·
Family history · Community engagement · Digital access**

Number of in-person visits

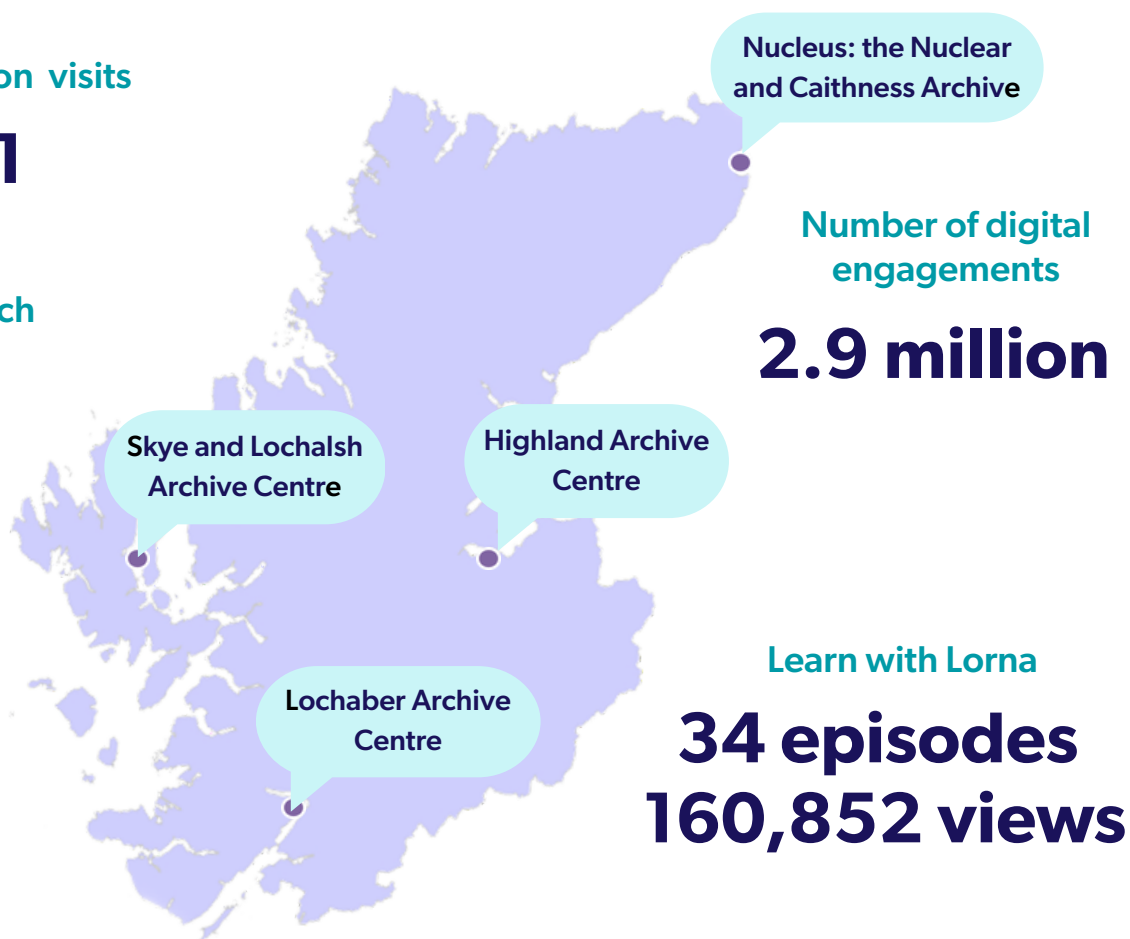
14,561

Number of outreach events

377

Attendances at outreach events

12,198



The Year in Numbers

Highland Archive Service

Comparison to 2024/25

- 12% increase in visits in-person
- 19% increase in digital engagement
- 1,884 more attendees at outreach events
- 72,457 more viewers for Learn with Lorna episodes
- 401,862 more engagements with Am Baile website

Engagement

Number of new collections

268

Number of new catalogued
collections

138

Number of original
archives produced

12,511



Number of volunteers

33

Number of volunteer hours

1,597



Number of new Records
Management consignments

105

Number of retrievals for
The Highland Council

1,698



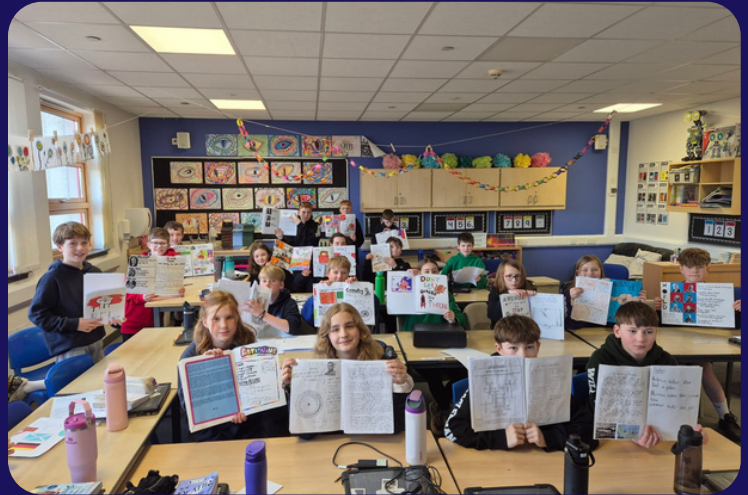
Schools Engagement

Number of school sessions

85

Number of participants

2,403



“The pupils all engaged really well and enjoyed learning new information about the topics. They were full of enthusiasm after your visit and you have definitely lit a wee spark in them. While the visits were undoubtedly fantastic for the pupils, they are also fantastically helpful for staff. After your visit last year, staff felt more confident in delivering lessons on these topics this year.”

Teacher at Duncan Forbes Primary School

School's Out

The Highland Archive Service contributes to the High Life Highland School's Out programme by providing sessions in collaboration with other services with particular emphasis on supporting the Active Schools' summer camps. In this setting, history-themed crafting activities allow some quiet time for young people between sporting and physical activities and provide a space for creative expression and reflection.



Following the Fish: Stories across archives



In 2024, funding was secured from Lloyds Registers Foundation for a joint project to be run by High Life Highland's Archive Service, Suffolk Archives, the Norfolk Record Office, and Tasglann nan Eilean (the Hebridean Archives).

The grant funding enabled the partners, with the help of volunteers and members of the public, to research and tell stories of the thousands of 'herring girls' (as they were known) who travelled round the British coast, following the fishing fleets and undertaking the backbreaking work of gutting and barrelling the catch.

A sometimes-overlooked part of our maritime history, these women played a substantial role in the economies and communities of fishing towns round Scotland and England, becoming seasoned travellers, and often marrying and settling far from home.

The project team was delighted to receive memories, recordings, and photographs from herring girls' family members, which enriched the story told in the resulting online and touring exhibitions. Following launch events held in Wick and Ipswich in May 2025, two sets of the touring exhibition are now making their way round dozens of venues in the Highlands and Islands and along the east coast of England. The online exhibition can be viewed at <https://suffolkarchives.shorthandstories.com/following-the-fish/>



Highland Archive Centre, Inverness

Talks, Tours and Community Connections



56

Talks

57

Group Visits

36

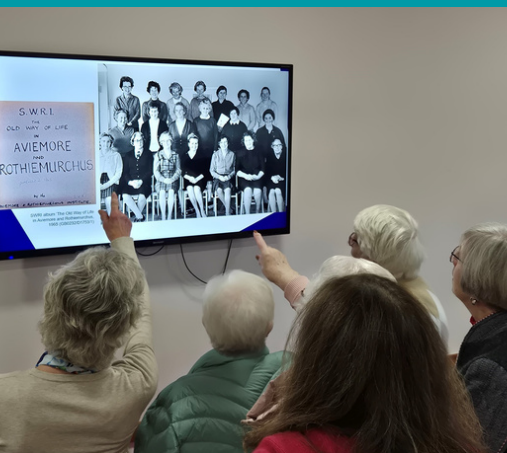
Classes

10

Community Events

3,976

Attendees



It is a privilege to do what we do and we enjoy sharing our work and collections with communities across the Highlands and beyond.

“ On behalf of all of our members who visited the Archive Centre yesterday I would like to thank you very much for the tour and the presentation you gave. Everyone really enjoyed it and I have had lots of feedback already from folk who are keen to make use of all the Archives have to offer. One comment was 'Brilliant asset for the Highlands'. I can certainly agree with that. ”

Programme Secretary, Glenurquhart Heritage Group

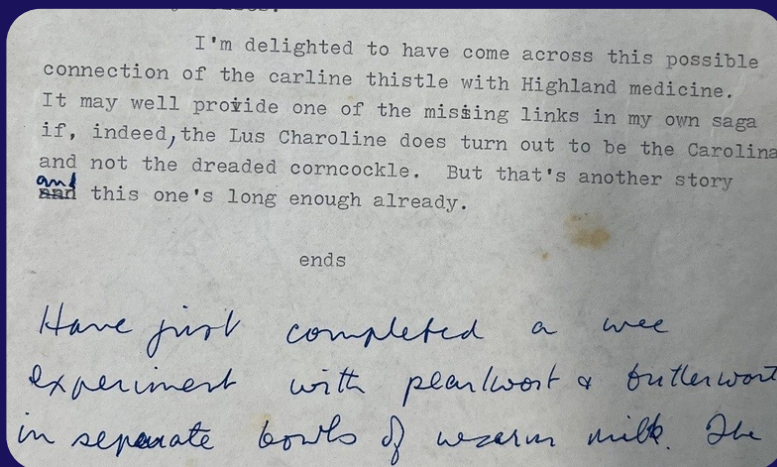


Highland Archive Centre

Cataloguing the Mary Beith collection

A cataloguing milestone was achieved this year when Archive Assistant Sarah completed cataloguing a large addition to our existing Mary Beith collection.

Mary Beith was an expert in the history of herbal healing, and the use of traditional remedies in Highland (especially Gaelic) history and culture. She wrote a fortnightly column for the West Highland Free Press newspaper and became an expert in the field of herbal and traditional medicine and she was often called upon to give advice and regularly lectured on the topic.



Cataloguing is a slow process with Sarah having to integrate the contents of the 29 boxes of additional material with the original collection of catalogued records. She cleaned, packaged, listed and renumbered items to produce a comprehensive catalogue for the whole collection. The collection details are available on our online catalogue portal with researchers able to access the original material at the Highland Archive Centre and explore the fascinating subjects Mary researched and wrote about.

Highland Archive Centre, Inverness

Family History

It has been a year of attendance at Highland Games and Fairs, giving talks, delivering classes as well as our usual research, 1-1 consultations and compiling family trees for customers. In August we welcomed members of Clan Mackenzie who were attending their International Clan Gathering and they enjoyed a tour of the Highland Archive Centre and a chance to view original Mackenzie related documents as well as chatting to our Family Historians, Anne and Alasdair, about any brick walls they had hit with their own family research. We also held a Family History Day in March to mark International Genealogy Day and enjoyed welcoming familiar faces as well as people just starting out on their family history journey.



There have been visitors from all over the world, one of them, Jacques Drouin, travelled from the USA on a quest to trace the family of one of the early settlers of his hometown, Caledonia in New York State. The memoirs he had in his possession described the father of the family as William Mackenzie, Schoolmaster of Leys, who lived at Tordarroch in the 18th century. Jacques had found very little in the typical genealogical resources to identify William in Scotland, however Alasdair discovered an 1851 publication which provided a history of William Mackenzie, the schoolmaster and bard, including his Balloan birthplace, his ancestor's names, and transcriptions of gravestones that have long since faded. Jacques was pleased to find William's grave in Dunlichity Churchyard and since returning home he has been knitting together the Mackenzie story from Strathnairn to America.

Nucleus: The Nuclear and Caithness Archives

Dounreay Reminiscence Group

The Dounreay Reminiscence Group (DRG), a partnership between Dounreay and Nucleus, was established in 2022 to bring former employees, friends, and families together to share memories while helping identify and enrich photographic collections held at Nucleus.

The group provides a welcoming space for connection and conversation, particularly during the winter months, helping to reduce social isolation and strengthen a shared sense of identity and pride in past work. At the same time, it delivers real archival value through the capture of unique knowledge and context

“ This is a great group to meet ‘old’ work colleagues and share stories of our times together. Also to keep an interest in what is going on on-site and the challenges that they are facing. The presentations from staff have been excellent and the visits to Nucleus very interesting” ”

The project has gained national recognition, contributing to the Scottish Council on Archives' Made in Scotland programme, with its impact shared at an event attended by Jamie McCaffrey, Caithness Archivist in Edinburgh in December 2025.



From

Memorandum

WS/6/15/3/16

Me 3rd 1913-

ADAM MCINTOSH,
GENERAL MERCHANT,
DUNBEATH.

To

Geo. Little Esq
Poor Inspector
Lybster

Dear Sir,

I beg to state that two days ago I found
the both George & Mary Latheron wheel in a very bad state
for want of fuel, They told me that they had ^{more} no fuel than

Latheron Combination Poorhouse Collection

Formed in 1853 to serve Latheron and Wick, Latheron Combination Poorhouse at Braehungie could house up to fifty inmates. Its records offer a compelling insight into poor relief and everyday life.

In 2020, Caithness Archives received 54 boxes of material (c.1900–1961) from the Wick Society, including correspondence between Inspectors of the Poor and applicants, alongside reports, notices, and accounts.



Archive Assistant Jen catalogued the collection, bringing both professional skill and a personal connection as a native of Latheron Parish:

“

“I’d heard stories about the poorhouse growing up, but working through the records really challenged my preconceptions. It revealed the complexity of poor relief and the reality of people’s lives. Handling each document was fascinating and I started noting recurring names, key dates, and changes over time.”

”

A guide to help others better understand the collection is now available to access, and each letter has been individually listed, greatly improving access and unlocking the collection’s rich research potential.

Lochaber Archive Centre

School visits

It has been a positive year for engagement with schools, led by Rory Green, Lochaber Archivist. Visits to Bun-Sgoil Ghàidhlig Loch Abar and Acharacle Primary brought to life topics such as the Clearances and the Jacobites using original archive material.

These sessions supported curriculum learning while giving pupils a chance to engage directly with local history, including opportunities to chat in Gaelic, helping to strengthen cultural as well as historical understanding. With more visits planned, there is clear and growing interest from schools in exploring local heritage through archives.

“*Rory was extremely professional and respectful with the class, and they were all very engaged in his presentation. He communicated well to the class and was happy to answer any questions they had. The information and resources provided were very well received and allowed for great classroom discussions. The class felt they learned a lot about the Highland Clearances from Rory.*”

Teacher from Bun-Sgoil Ghàidhlig Loch Abar





Lochaber Archive Centre Community events

It was another busy year for community engagement in Lochaber, with opportunities to return to the Arisaig Highland Games and take part in the Jacobite Festival. A highlight was hosting the Jacobite document exhibition, and even taking it on the road to the Glenfinnan National Trust Centre for a couple of days. These events are always a great chance to share our unique collections and connect with both local communities and visitors from further afield.

Our partnership with Mallaig Heritage Centre continued, with some great joint projects. Highlights in 2025/26 included collaborating on a shared display at the RNLI fundraising open day and working together on an exhibition celebrating 125 years of the West Highland Railway extension to Mallaig.

These events have been a fantastic way to bring our collections together to tell local stories, with more community-focused joint projects and reminiscence sessions planned for the year ahead.



Skye and Lochalsh Archive Centre

Community Connections



In May 2025 we hosted the touring exhibition *Where We Stand* from Community Land Scotland, celebrating a century of community land ownership. Alongside this, we co-facilitated a workshop with singer Anne Martin at the Community Land Scotland Conference, exploring how archive material can support storytelling, local identity, and community-led initiatives. This provided a valuable opportunity to connect historical records with contemporary discussions around land and community.

We continued to work closely with a range of community groups, including a visit from the ladies of Tigh Na Drochaid Resource Centre. Exploring archive material and our World War Two exhibition sparked lively discussion and reminiscence, highlighting the archive's role as a welcoming space for connection, shared memory, and community wellbeing.



We joined the Kyleakin Local History Society as they marked the 30th anniversary of the Skye Bridge with a vibrant gathering that honoured both the island's past and the profound changes ushered in since the bridge's opening in 1995. Held in Kyleakin Hall, the celebration featured a rich exhibition of photographs, film, ferry memorabilia, bridge models and toll-era artefacts, supported by contributions from the Skye and Lochalsh Archive Centre.

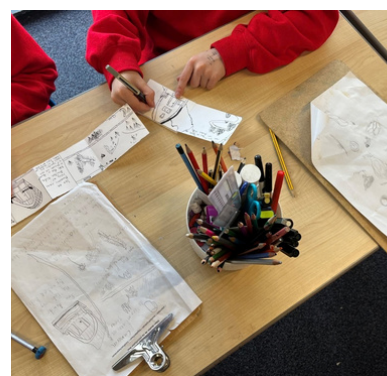




Skye and Lochalsh Archive Centre Exhibition Highlights

In summer 2025, Skye and Lochalsh Archive Centre hosted *ùir-sgeul* | earth story, an exhibition by Skye-based artist Eilidh MacKenzie exploring the island's shieling (*àirigh*) culture through art, archives, and oral tradition. Drawing on songs, maps, archaeological evidence and archive material, the exhibition offered a reflective exploration of land use, community, and cultural memory.

We supported the project through research, access to collections, contributing to interpretation and hosted a series of events including an exhibition preview, artist talk, and associated activities which encouraged community engagement and deeper exploration of the themes.



Developed as part of the wider Curious Travellers research project, the exhibition demonstrated the value of partnership working in connecting collections with contemporary creative practice. It also resulted in a published companion volume, extending its impact to a wider audience.

Funding for the exhibition came from Creative Scotland, Glasgow University, The University of Wales, The Arts and Humanities Research Council, and the Highland Council Ward Discretionary Funding.

Am Baile Website Highlights 25/26

2,206

New pieces of content added to the Am Baile database, contributed by individuals, local historians, and community heritage groups.

598

New pieces of content published on the website, broadening the range of historical material available on life in the Highlands and Islands.



Page views on Am Baile Website

274,651

Social Media Engagements

1,882,658

The most popular post of the year was a photograph of the collapse of the Ness Viaduct, Inverness in February 1989 with 13,408 people engaging with the post.



Records Management

Highlights from 2025/26



June 2025 marked the retirement of Trevor Nicol, Records Manager since 2014, following many years of dedicated service. His departure underscored the strength of our succession planning, with Rachel McLean appointed to the role in July after progressing through the service from Trainee Records Officer. She subsequently achieved her Archives and Records Management qualification with the University of Dundee in November, becoming the sixth professionally qualified member of the team to develop in this way. This reflects the continued success of our 'grow your own' approach, through which we support staff to gain professional qualifications via funded distance learning, while building skills and capacity within the service.

Following this transition, and the departure of Assistant Alex to pursue further study, the team was strengthened through the recruitment of Kathryn Thomas as Trainee Records Officer and Andrew Howieson as Archive Assistant. They join Rachel and Assistant Paul in completing the team. The team continues to support good information governance across The Highland Council and High Life Highland, ensuring the secure and efficient management of records, and feedback from our annual RM customer survey remains highly positive with a satisfaction rating of 4.81 out of 5.



“

A vital and highly informed team who are always willing to assist and also interested in your goal to access the information. We have a great working relationship with them and it makes for a smooth service.

”

Conservation Service

Training Days

We are very fortunate to have a dedicated Conservation Service within High Life Highland to support colleagues in developing practical conservation skills that contribute directly to the care and preservation of our shared collections. Throughout 2025/26 Senior Conservator Richard Aitken was busy delivering training sessions to members of the archives team across all centres to support their skills development.

One session held at Skye and Lochalsh Archive Centre focused on disaster response, and Richard pictured alongside Archivist Catherine below, showed how to rescue and stabilise documents affected by flooding, emphasising the importance of acting quickly and effectively during an emergency. Developing these practical skills helps to significantly minimise damage and supports the long-term preservation of valuable historical and cultural material.

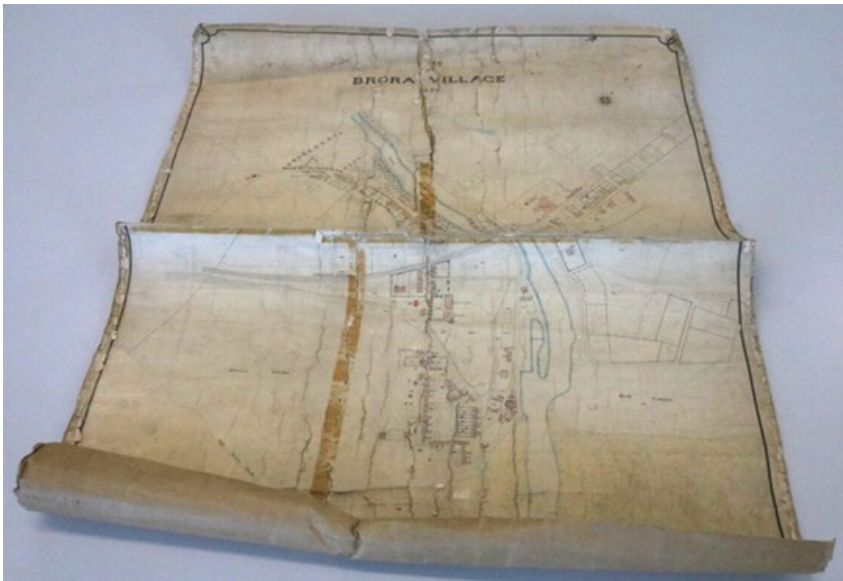
In another session, Richard focussed on the humidification of documents, beginning by ensuring all items were carefully cleaned before treatment, before constructing a humidification chamber to create a controlled, airtight environment. The documents were left within the chamber for several hours to relax the fibres, before being transferred between sheets of heavy blotting paper and weighted to dry flat.

This work highlights the value of hands-on training in building confidence, strengthening resilience, and ensuring our collections are protected for the future.



Conservation Service

In August the Conservation Service completed work on an 1899 plan of Brora Village at the request of Clyne Heritage Society ahead of the opening of the new Brora Heritage Centre. The plan was conserved then digitised, with a high definition copy printed to scale to be exhibited at the Centre.



The original plan required re-backing due to extensive creasing down the middle, and staining and damage caused by historical repairs attempted with Sellotape, as can be seen in the picture to the left. The staining and residue were reduced with swabs of acetone, applied with particular care around areas of content. The map and linen were humidified, to release the lining and two areas of lining with a handwritten title were removed and retained. The map was sprayed with calcium bicarbonate to add an alkaline to the paper and covered in polythene. Dirt was drawn out using a bone folder under the polythene.

A new lining of Okawara 60gsm paper was adhered using paste onto the map wall the day before lining. Once dry the map wall was brushed with paste again, positioning the map along the top, later bonefolding through terylene onto the map to removed excess paste and air bubbles. Once this stage was complete the map was sized by brushing on a warm 2% gelatine solution. Infills were created using Hosokawa 39gsm Japanese paper, and areas of weakness supported using 5gsm Tengucho Japanese tissue.

The map was housed within a roll of polyester and the areas of original lining showing the handwritten title were housed at the back of the map within the polyester roll.





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Highland Archive Centre
Bught Road
Inverness
IV3 5SS