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I am not sure what Culture really is, but I have a number of Hobby Horses to ride namely Archaeology, Earth Sciences and Art all of which need some consideration.

Archaeology

There are hundreds of archaeological sites in Caithness dating from the Mesolithic to recent. They were last surveyed at the beginning of the 20th century. A more recent study is of the Chambered Tombs only. Only three of the sites are signposted and most of the ones which have been excavated are sadly neglected. Compare this with Orkney where the more accessible ones are in care and are well signposted. We have more stone circles and alignments than Orkney, more brochs and more castles. If this Cultural Landscape was developed it could bring real tourism to the county; at present we are just a staging post to Orkney.

Earth Sciences

The Moray Firth area is famous for its Fossil Fishes; see Hugh Miller. The most famous site for these fishes is Achanarras Quarry in Caithness, which is world famous for the largest number of genera and species from any single site. It has been of interest since the 1870s. It was classified as a National Nature Reserve until this year when Scottish Natural Heritage downgraded it to a mere SSSI.

Years ago I wrote a book on the Fossil Fishes which went into two editions and several reprints. This third edition has been languishing in typescript for over a decade waiting for a publisher. Three of us got together to produce a leaflet (enclosed). This has been reprinted owing to National Interest.

Art

The Caithness Artists Association has been in operation for over half a century. I am a committee member. It has been patronised by HM Queen Mother for many years and, for the last three by the Prince of Wales. The annual exhibition has historically been held in Thurso Town Hall. The Town Hall is to be upgraded to comply with regulations for disabled access. Part of the funding for this is to be provided by the UK Atomic Energy Authority to house the Dounreay Exhibition. This means the loss of the hall used by the Caithness Artists. There is no other venue in Thurso large enough to house the 400+ exhibits. This might mean the end of an era for the Caithness Artists.

The Museum of which I was the Curator and which held two Nationally important collections was closed down many years ago and the contents dispersed. I retained my Fossil Fish collection. The Museum was converted into a small Art Gallery, but the overall control was from Inverness and the people of Thurso have no say in the touring exhibitions, some of which I would have difficulty in passing off as art. The only exhibition I thought valuable was of the Scottish Colourists (Ferguson, Cadell etc.).

For years I have run small classes in Painting for Pleasure, the last three years being in one of the country schools. Some of my pupils have gone on to exhibit their work.

A Venue for Cultural Activities

I believe that Thurso deserves a Community Centre in which all kinds of cultural and sporting activities can be carried on, including political hustings, craft fairs, music, religious activities etc. Perhaps if all those institutions currently making use of the Town Hall could get together they could explore routes to raise funding to build something to satisfy all needs.

Jack Saxon

