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The Field Station: from ex-army huts to SCENE

C.E. Adams

Scottish Centre for Ecology & the Natural Environment,
Rowardennan, Glasgow G63 0AW

E-mail: colin.adams@glasgow.ac.uk

The University of Glasgow has operated a field research station on Loch Lomond continuously since 1946. The first field station was at Rosdhu on the western shore of the loch, immediately to the south of what is now the Loch Lomond Golf Club. The field station was established to build upon very successful courses in limnology offered by the Department of Zoology, initiated and taught by Harry Slack. These courses began in 1938 but were interrupted by World War II and only re-established in 1946. This field station was constructed from equipment surplus to the war effort and constructed at low cost on land within the grounds of Rosdhu House made available by Sir Iain Colquhoun, the laird of Luss Estates. The concept behind the field station was to provide a base from which field ecology research could be conducted and where students at all levels, from honours to PhD, could be given the opportunity to explore ecology in the natural environment. An early product - BSc (1959) and PhD (1963) - was Peter Maitland who progressed to a lectureship at Glasgow, then to the Nature Conservancy Council (1967) before embarking on his long career as a freshwater fish specialist. For many years this facility was the only one of its kind at a U.K. university.

Although the Rosdhu field station was a considerable success for students and staff in the Department of Zoology, the physical infrastructure, which comprised two ex-army huts, limited what could be achieved there. Thus, under the enthusiastic leadership of Harry Slack and with considerable support from C.M. Yonge, work began on establishing a purpose-built field station on the east side of Loch Lomond at Rowardennan, on land purchased from the then Forestry Commission. By 1963, construction work was underway and in 1964 the Glasgow University Field Station was officially opened. The purpose-built facility provided a field base, laboratory space to analyse samples and accommodation. The upper floor included two dormitories (capacity about 20), five single rooms, kitchen and shower/toilet facilities, and a multi-purpose room that served for lectures, meals and had space for a library. Downstairs was the teaching laboratory and two small research laboratories. According to Roger Tippet, Harry Slack had the slightly odd idea that students might wake in the middle of the night keen to examine specimens, so the dormitories were fitted with a

laboratory bench and equipment! A separate building housed the Field Station's caretaker/boatman/technician.

The first residential field course for Glasgow undergraduates took place in 1964, and began after the examinations in June. The single rooms were occupied by postgraduate students. One of the many attractions of this site was easy access to some of the finest habitat types in Scotland. Loch Lomond itself was made accessible by the construction of a boatshed in 1964 on the loch shore. Access to the oak woodlands on the Ross Peninsula, leased for teaching and scientific purposes from the Forestry Commission, and to the Dubh Lochan, a small glacial kettle lake immediately to the north of the new facility (both being designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest and, later, Special Areas for Conservation) greatly enhanced the capacity for teaching and research there.

In the early 1970s, Stirling University negotiated an agreement to share use of the Field Station and provided funds to extend the capacity of the dormitories and laboratories to provide dormitory accommodation for around 30 students and a new larger teaching laboratory. To reflect the involvement of the two universities, the facility was rebranded as the University Field Station. For the next two decades, under the leadership of Roger Tippet, field courses from across Europe and beyond brought undergraduates to study ecology in the residential facilities there. PhD students and post-doctoral researchers worked on a very wide range of freshwater and terrestrial ecology topics ranging from aphid population dynamics to limnological processes. During this period, research funding was tight and Roger Tippet became adept at obtaining funds from sources such as the Manpower Services Commission for educational and environmental monitoring projects.

By the late 1990s the facilities had reached the end of their useful life and were in constant need of repair. In addition, Stirling University had withdrawn from the management of the site. A group of eminent scientists from industry, academia, government and the environmental charity sector was formed to consider the future of the field station. They concluded that there was a continuing and compelling need for a field station and the University of Glasgow senior management agreed. Thus, under the guidance of Professors Felicity Huntingford and David Green, began a programme of grant applications and a philanthropic fund-raising campaign to raise funding to replace and expand the facilities. In 2007, a new research building was completed at the site of the old University Field Station and seven years later, a new residential teaching facility was opened. This completed a £7.6 million redevelopment, creating the Scottish Centre for Ecology and the Natural Environment (SCENE) (Fig. 1). Both buildings were constructed to the highest levels of environmental sustainability that were reasonably possible. Both are heated with heat-pumps, have

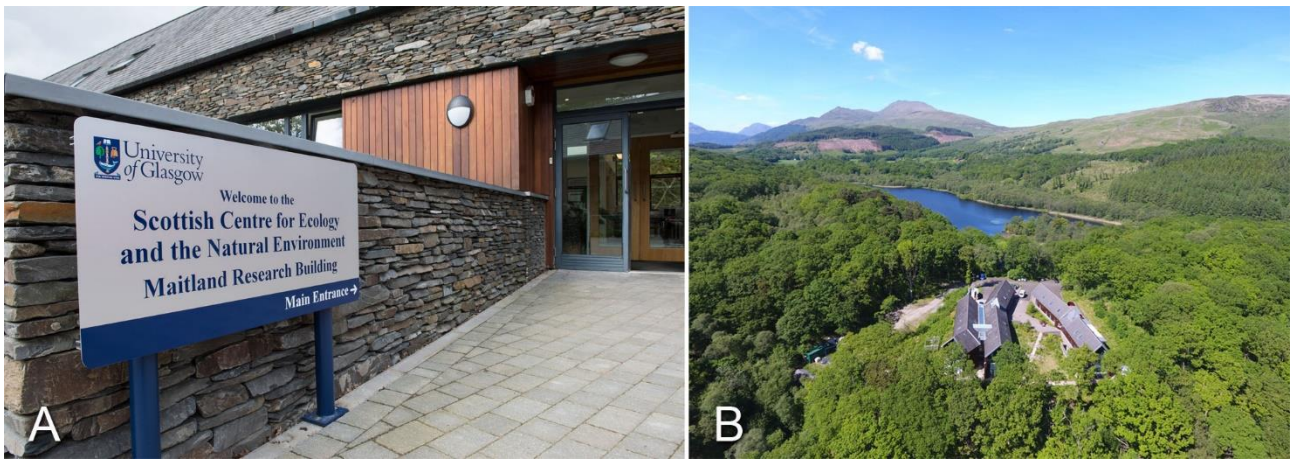


Fig. 1. The Scottish Centre for Ecology and the Natural Environment (SCENE). (A) The entrance. (B) From above: SCENE in the foreground, the Dubh Lochan in the middle ground and Ben Lomond in the background. (Photos: SCENE)

exceptionally high levels of thermal insulation and building materials and the construction process scored by an industry standard environmental assessment (Building Research Establishment Environmental Assessment Method) as “Excellent”. In recognition of this the first building to be constructed won the 2008 Carbon Trust Low Carbon Building Award.

SCENE currently supports around 20 research projects and 27 researchers, and around 3,500 student-nights are spent in the facilities by visiting groups who come to learn more about ecology, the environment and how both are managed, by immersing themselves in some of the most important ecosystems that Scotland has to offer.

Thanks to Roger Tippet and Walter Edgar for recollections of the earlier days of the Field Station.