



# The Langholm buyout: the story so far

*The sale of Langholm Moor has led to the south of Scotland's largest community buyout attempt, as Alison Hutton reports.*

**L**angholm is in the very south of Scotland, on the A7 between Carlisle and Edinburgh, just north of the English border and at the head of the Solway Firth. It is 20 miles away in all directions from other settlements of any size and surrounded by hills. Proudly a town, but the size of a village, Langholm used to be a thriving, bustling centre of the textile industry in Scotland, weaving tweeds and worsteds and exporting them to the world. However, by the late 1990s, capital had gone elsewhere for cheaper labour. The looms went to places far away. Children leave, for education and work, and do not return. The population is aging. Something really needs to be done.

All the land around the town is part of the huge lowland estate of one of the Scottish dukes. It covers much of eastern Dumfriesshire and neighbouring regions and has done so for hundreds of years. The great ducal fiefdoms of the south of Scotland have sufficient good-quality, low land for the estates to make excellent rents. The higher and poorer ground

can then be used for recreational shooting, supporting the necessary gamekeeping staff to maintain the moorlands for grouse. Tenants farm the better agricultural ground in the valleys round Langholm. The 'back of the hill' was a very, very large grouse moor, divided east to west by a narrow valley, which is farmed with sheep and cattle. There is a diverse range of landscapes included within two or so miles of the town: moorland (containing the Common Moss), woodlands, commercial plantations, grass parks, small ravines or 'cleuchs', tumbling burns and a sizeable river, the Tarras.

In May 2019, Langholm was absolutely stunned by the news that the Estate was to sell 25,000 acres of the Langholm Moor and Tarras valley. The dukes acquired land through feudal charter, marriage and purchase, and never sold it. However, that was then. How times change. After 400 years, the Estate has decided to reduce its footprint and this vast area is to be sold. The land for sale is mostly poor, steep, rough, rocky, peaty ground up to 1,000 feet above sea level, clad with heather, bracken, sphagnum and purple moor grass. A huge 'knackered'

grouse moor, as conservationist Dr Ruth Tingay described it, but also including the Tarras Valley and the other varied landscapes. A hundred years ago, the moor was famous for the number of grouse shot in a day and held the daily record of 2,522 in 1911 [1]. Where thousands of birds were killed in a day, now there are not enough grouse to shoot commercially. Wildlife protection acts have made the killing of many species illegal. Pairs of the extraordinarily rare and beautiful hen harriers have made the moor their home, snacking on voles and young grouse, sky-dancing up and down the valley and attracting SSSI (1985) and European SPA (2001) designations. The land has been extensively studied since the early 1990s in attempts to see if raptors and grouse could co-exist and still allow an economic surplus of grouse to be shot. The Joint Raptor Study ran from 1992 until 1997 and the Langholm Moor Demonstration Project (LMDP) from 2008 to 2017 [2]. Broadly speaking, the answer to this tricky question is—No. The moor lost its LMDP gamekeepers in 2016.

## **New hope**

Sheep have gradually been taken off the moor over the last 30 years under

Above: A male hen harrier at Langholm. Photo: John Wright.

various agri-environmental schemes [1] and parts are now not grazed or browsed by anything except the feral goats and roe deer. Relieved of grazing pressure birch, willow and rowan are growing well up on the Tarras valley sides. The heather moorland is gradually being infiltrated by birch and rowan together with spruce seedlings from the commercial plantations to the south. Much of the land is already re-wilding and the suppression of 250 years is being lifted.



The Common Moss is all that remains of the Common of Langholm after it was divided between landowners in 1759 at the Court of Session—but the town still has a close relationship with the moorland. Inhabitants and tenants were given continuous access to the undivided Moss for ‘peats, flacks, stanes’ and everything else that sustained the common people of 300 years ago. Every year for 260 years since then, the town has marked the boundaries of the Moss during the annual Common Riding which has developed into a grand celebration of Langholm and is its most significant and important cultural event.

Above: Langholm Moor. Photo: Tom Hutton.

The Langholm Initiative, a 25-year-old award winning charity, had never considered buying land in the hope of developing rural employment or using land as part of its resources, partly because land was never available. But now, if the Estate was selling then the Initiative could buy! Ownership would mean that decisions about the land could be made by local people, for local benefit, with a national vision. There were plenty of people with ideas: restoration of the land, woodland planting, small-scale green energy, educational courses along the lines of Sir John Lister Kaye’s work at Aigas, and the employment of youngsters who might have been game keepers in the past but who could now use countryside skills to encourage the return of sadly missing wildlife, developing a mosaic of different habitats, small woodland businesses—addressing the climate emergency, re-wetting the peat, improving the remaining buildings, developing rural housing. Heads were definitely in a whirl and it all had to happen extremely fast.

A working group was formed by the Initiative. The experienced land-manager fortunately employed by the Initiative to develop an eco-tourism business on the moorland, with the blessing of the Estate, already had the germ of a nature reserve in mind and he wrote the proposal up: the Tarras Valley Nature Reserve—10,550 acres of moor and valley. The Estate’s consultation opened and within ten days the Initiative had the signatures of a third of the local population asking that a purchase should be investigated. The Estate agreed that the Langholm Initiative could have exclusive rights to investigate and devise a purchase.

Since then there has been a structured whirlwind of activity, particularly

for the working group on the moor. Applications have been written, discussions have been carried out with dozens of organisations, politicians have visited, as have the Scottish Land Fund, Borders Forest Trust and Channel 4 News. It feels as if every environmental NGO has visited. This is the largest buyout attempt by a local community in the south of Scotland and has attracted great interest. Business and feasibility consultants have been employed—the business study showed that the land could be managed with a surplus from the very beginning, rare among community buyouts. An independent valuation reached a value of just over six million pounds. The public have been consulted and donations totalling £180,000 have been received.

The Scottish Land Fund has offered a million pounds on condition that all other money will be in place by the end of October 2020. The pandemic has intervened; the Scottish Government’s mind is on Covid-19. At the time of writing there are other large sums of money being pledged to help with the buyout, but whether or not this will be sufficient to conclude in time is unknowable. The smaller sums of money coming in from the crowdfunder are often accompanied by the dearest wish of the donor that the project succeeds—a wish shared by this writer.

[langholminitiative.org.uk](http://langholminitiative.org.uk)

### References

1. Ludwig, S. *et al.* (2020). Differential responses of heather and red grouse to long-term spatio-temporal variation in sheep grazing. *Biodiversity and Conservation*, 29(8): 2689-2710. doi.org/10.1007/s10531-020-01994-8.
2. Langholm Moor Demonstration Project final report, which can be downloaded at [langholmproject.com](http://langholmproject.com)

*Alison Hutton has lived in Langholm for nearly 50 years and is a founding member of the moor working group. The campaign has received a tremendous boost from the Carman Family Foundation, who donated £500,000, and South of Scotland Enterprise has donated £1 million. You can help too by donating to the crowdfunder at [gofundme.com/sflangholm-moor-buyout](https://gofundme.com/sflangholm-moor-buyout).*