

# CWIF-WAYFARER

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## STROUPSTER PLI SUMMARY PRECOGNITION OF MURRAY WATTS

Mr. Shiel,

I believe that Stroupster Windfarm will overwhelm one of the most beautiful and significant sites in Scotland. Freswick Bay, the Castle and the surrounding area have a unique combination of historical importance, outstanding natural beauty and remarkable bio-diversity. This site is a precious inheritance which should be treated with the greatest sensitivity. Stroupster Windfarm would unquestionably dominate this whole environment and radically and detrimentally affect this landscape.

### INTRODUCTION

All aspects of the Freswick Castle project would be affected by this development. Freswick Castle is a unique environment which, by its very nature, attracts a special kind of visitor to the area. Perceptions of a changed landscape would have a negative impact in a variety of ways on the potential for attracting visiting ornithologists, film-makers, visual artists and people seeking artistic and spiritual retreat. Serious concerns about the proposed development range from artistic projects, business issues, tourism and the international image of this remarkable environment.

### A PERSONAL JOURNEY

I hope you will bear with me as I begin the examination of these issues with a biographical note. In 1995, I drove north from Wick towards John O'Groats for the first time. It was a journey that would change my life and affect the lives of many other people too, although I had no idea of its significance at the time. I had been a tourist in Sutherland and Caithness on many occasions over the previous thirty years, but this time I had come to look at a property. I had been searching for many years for the right place to develop a haven for artists and creative people, where guests from all over the world could write, paint, make films, converse and enjoy hospitality.

I carried with me a photograph and some details about Freswick Castle but it is easy for impressions to deceive and for hopes to be dashed. What happened, as I approached Freswick on that cold February day fourteen years ago, was exactly the opposite. I was overwhelmed by the beauty and quiet grandeur of that scene, infinitely better than the photographs; I was thrilled by the sense of ancient history and the blue bay, the burn flowing into the sea, the village of Skirza unfolding along the headland, the

loneliness of Warth Hill rising in the distance and the wild moorlands reaching so far to the west. It was impossible to imagine a place where there was such an epic meeting-place between human habitation and genuine wildness, between important historic architecture and old and new cottages nestling in the landscape, and between the small figures of farmers, villagers and charity walkers and the immensity of sky and the vast horizons.

I studied Art History as a student and visited the Sistine Chapel Ceiling several times, but looking at the skies of Caithness I knew immediately that there was something so much greater here in the Far North. This was the artistry of nature itself, a landscape which should be celebrated around the world. If anyone had told me then that in ten years time people would be seriously proposing to erect 12 one hundred and thirteen metre tall turbines in this location, I would not have believed them. I would have reacted with incredulity. I would have regarded this with more outrage than if someone had suggested painting huge white stripes all across Michelangelo's masterpiece – for there is a wonder in the world of Caithness which is far greater than even the greatest works of human imagination. Why would the people of the Far North sell their birthright? I would not have believed that then, and I do not believe that now, because of the wisdom and rightful pride in this community I have come to know and respect so greatly.

I was able to move to Freswick full time in 2002. My children have been educated here, they have put down roots and consider this their true home. Freswick Castle, the cottages, and this inspiring environment have become my home too – but a home shared with hundreds of others over many years.

## **AN INTERNATIONAL PROJECT**

Many creative people from around the world have been drawn to the extraordinary power of this location. Interest in the Freswick project increases in New York, London, Toronto, Oslo, Amsterdam, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Bratislava, Barcelona, Cape Town.

A great deal has been achieved but it is also true to say that though we are on the threshold of something very significant, like a butterfly emerging from a chrysalis, this is also a moment of great vulnerability.

## **TAKING THE LONG VIEW**

It is very important that we take the long view. By this I mean five or ten years, not the supposed generation or far more, beyond the probable lifetime of some of us, when turbines may be taken down.

We must consider the potential of John O'Groats, and the remarkable site of Freswick Castle and its environment. We must envision the Castle fully renovated, at the hub of exhibitions of archaeology, history, wildlife, a place to be visited by schoolchildren, a place of ecological, historical and artistic quest for the young people of Caithness, as well as a vital international hub of creativity. If we saw all this happening, we would say a hundred times over, this is not the place for a wind farm

## **THE POWER OF LANDSCAPE**

My witness, Mr. Roger Murray-Leach, one of Britain's best known film production designers, will speak about the significant potential for film-making in the Freswick region and the danger to this possibility of the proposed development.

But film-makers can also teach us to understand the power of an open landscape. It is one thing, for example, to show a wide shot of the Grand Canyon in its vast loneliness, it is altogether another to show the same wide shot with a figure on a horse trailing dust. The moving object defines the story. It becomes what the landscape is about, and this is the greatest danger with erecting giant moving turbines on the wild moorland landscape of this corner of Caithness. A single still tower, like the Nybster tower, may become part of the grand scene, but giant moving objects truly dominate and draw the eye constantly and redefine the landscape. In a fundamental sense, the Stroupster Wind Farm would become the statement we wish to make about our inheritance and our environment: modernity and industry, no bad thing in themselves, but vastly out of scale and disastrously out of context.

Creative people, as much as they applaud renewable energy in all its forms, care deeply about context: and to put a wind farm here speaks loudly of 'robbing Peter to pay Paul', of degrading an environment in the name of 'The environment.'

## **SPIRITUAL AND MATERIAL**

There is a charity which has the most important part to play in the long-term development at Freswick. The Wayfarer Trust has artistic, educational, environmental and spiritual objectives, and considers these to be indivisible. Mr Luke Walton, a new trustee, will speak as a witness about the Wayfarer Trust and its hundreds of supporters. I would simply like to state here that spiritual values can easily be overlooked in our rush to deal with material problems and concerns, including the supply of renewable energy.

It is commonly said that 'Global warming' is the world's greatest threat. It is not. The world's greatest threat is human greed. Global warming is a terrible symptom of rampant greed on an epic scale. The same vice of human greed lies behind the shallow materialism, hedonism and lust for money which has nearly led us to the brink of global financial meltdown.

The reason I make this point is that all too often we approach the issue of the environment from a materialistic point of view. But the experience of Freswick for myself and so many visitors here has been to go deeper than this, to re-discover spiritual awareness; to experience the wind as an elemental power, not as a commodity to be harnessed; to experience wild spaces as environments for awesome reflection, for a radical reassessment of priorities; to encounter the teeming wildlife as a humbling reality which is so much greater than our material aspirations, including our needs for more electricity.

It would be ironic to abandon the exploitation of the environment in favour of another kind of more subtle exploitation, in which renewable energy gets mixed up with powerful vested financial interests, where large-scale industrialisation of the landscape overwhelms the humbler contributions to this crisis, and in which 'wind' becomes a resource and our last remaining wild spaces near to human habitation become available territories to be filled with whirling machinery.

All I ask, and all the hundreds of supporters and visitors to this place ask, is that wind farms are more sensitively sited. There is a need to protect those who are vulnerable, and we consider this project to be very vulnerable indeed in the light of Stroupster proposal.

### **A PERSONAL PLEA**

This is the situation which has led me to despair and, for the first time, with all the ups and downs of years, to question my decision to come here. I want to stay, I have made this place my home, I want to do everything I can, to join hands with others, in the enrichment of cultural life in the Far North. But for many weeks now I haven't been able to write, or earn money... why? I am defending the landscape. I am not being paid to develop the Freswick Castle project. I am doing it because I believe in it, because it matters more to me than my own personal ups and downs, emotionally and financially. I believe in Caithness and in her people, and in this place, and its great potential for the future.

Mr Shiel, I am asking you to champion the Far North and give people like me a reason to carry on.

### **ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL IMPACT**

Freswick Castle now has planning permission and building warrant for a major renovation and refurbishment. The site already includes art studios, a beautiful library of 5,000 books, a delightful guest cottage, and many rooms available for hospitality and work in the Castle, including a chapel and café area in the medieval vaults.

Hundreds of visitors have come, films have been made, projects developed. As for the exciting future, the work at Freswick Castle will bring in money and resources, investment and creative input, from all over the world. The eventual momentum at Freswick will range from employment opportunity for builders, landscape gardeners, caterers, administrative staff, designers, artists and young film makers, not to mention the revenue for restaurants, hotels, taxi companies and local shops

The young people of Caithness will benefit from courses and training opportunities, alongside the many programmes aimed at visitors from all over the world. It would be desperately sad for all this potential to be lost.

### **CONCLUSION**

I have said something of the achievements of recent years, and also the extraordinary future potential of the project at Freswick Castle. I have explained why the proposed erection of the turbines at Stroupster is profoundly threatening to this enterprise.

However, I want to conclude by saying that even if nothing had ever happened at Freswick Castle in recent years, and no wonderful project were being developed at such great cost of commitment, time and money, it would still be quite wrong for this application to be allowed. Whoever owns Freswick Castle, and whoever lives in this glorious north-eastern corner of Caithness, must share the responsibility of stewardship for the immediate and the longer-term future.

This particular area is surely not only one of the crown jewels of Caithness, but is at the very top of one of the most beautiful countries in the world and should literally crown the Scottish nation and shine in all its purity and beauty for generations to come.

It is not selfishness, nimbyism, small-mindedness, but – in my view – a moral obligation to stand up for Caithness and to believe in a remarkable future; a future which can include sensitively sited wind power, tidal power, renewables of every kind, technology and industry, but must include – must preserve – must enhance – its grandeur and glory, its uniqueness, which is now under threat. Caithness should be singing around the world about what it has in great abundance: space, sky, wilderness on the edge of civilisation, vistas which bring spiritual and artistic inspiration, an elemental power which reminds us of our place in the universe and speaks eloquently of the spiritual as well as material values on which our ultimate survival depends.