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[Sport](#)
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[Politics](#)
[Obama](#)
[Features](#)
[Going Out](#)
[Herald Society](#)
[Society Awards 08](#)
[Fashion Awards](#)
[Maggies](#)
[Schools Tables](#)
[Property Awards](#)
[Politician 2008](#)

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[Herald Blogs](#)

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[International Festival](#)
[Fringe](#)
[Book Festival](#)
[AyeWrite08](#)
[Music Festival 08](#)
[Celtic Connections](#)
[Festival Archive](#)

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[Motors videos](#)
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The Herald

SCOTLAND'S LEADING QUALITY DAILY NEWSPAPER

Raasay islanders vow to rebuild historic house ravaged in blaze

DAVID ROSS, [Highland Correspondent](#)

January 19 2009

An island community is vowing to rebuild a historic building ravaged by fire at the weekend just weeks before it was due to reopen following a £4m refurbishment.

Raasay House, which has been run as an activity centre for nearly quarter of century and has welcomed hundreds of youngsters from across the UK on its courses each year, was undergoing a major revamp ahead of a grand reopening in April.

But the A-listed building on the island of Raasay was all but destroyed by fire in the early hours of yesterday.

Witnesses said the flames were reaching into the night sky, fanned by gales. Now only the west wing and the walls of the rest of the building remain standing.

With visitors already booked in for courses, islanders said they were reeling from what would be a devastating blow to the local economy, setting the island back years.

Last night, staff and islanders spoke of their devastation at the blaze but set out their determination to repair the damage.

Managing director Lyn Rowe said: "I am absolutely shocked by what has happened. But the most important thing by far is that nobody was in the building at the time. Nobody was hurt, which is fantastic. It could have been so much worse because it was a raging fire on such a dreadful night.

"We have absolutely no idea how it started. We don't know at all, but I daresay investigators will be coming to establish what caused it.

"We were due to be open before Easter. We had a wedding booked for April. So we don't know what will happen now. But I think already everybody is determined that it will be rebuilt. It's a big old house and the walls are still standing, so why not?"

"This is devastating but there have been setbacks before at Raasay House and we will rise again."

When Ms Rowe arrived to set up the centre, much of the building was derelict but over the years comfortable accommodation, a restaurant, cafe/bar and small gift shop have been added. It had become a major tourist attraction for the island.

The house was taken over by the community from previous owners Highlands and Island Enterprise (HIE) in 2007. It was getting new bathrooms, more bedrooms, upgraded IT facilities, new conference rooms, a bar and central heating. Inverness builder Rok was awarded the contract by HIE last year.

The alarm was raised at 1.15am and volunteer firefighters turned out while Portree lifeboat was launched to take over a team from the Skye brigade.

In the meantime, the Caledonian MacBrayne car ferry had been called out to take the fire engines from Portree and Broadford from Sconser to Raasay.

As dawn broke the people in the Braes area of Skye could see the smoke still rising from

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the mansion. The £4m funding package to refurbish Raasay House came from HIE, the Big Lottery and Historic Scotland.

Crofter Donnie Oliphant, chairman of Raasay Community Council, said: "The community is actually in shock by what has happened. This is a huge blow to the island. The centre was a great draw for tourists and its Dolphin Cafe was very popular with visitors and the local community alike.

"It is owned by the Raasay House Community Company. It was so near to being completed and the Raasay Outdoor Centre (who were taking a long lease of the building) were due to restart their business in a couple of months. This will set them back years. But from the ashes something good might yet rise again. Islanders are pretty resilient and most will want to have it rebuilt."

Mr Oliphant said he felt particularly sorry for the contractors who had taken such care in their work.

He confirmed that the building was insured and that although it was owned by the community, HIE was still involved.

Robert Muir, HIE's manager for Lochaber, Skye and Wester Ross, said he was very aware of what this meant to the island: "The overnight blaze is a devastating blow for the Raasay community which has worked tirelessly for years to deliver this project for the benefit of the island.

"HIE is fully committed to supporting the residents' ambition to improve the local economy and we will continue to work with them to achieve their goal despite this appalling setback."

Witness to history

- The original Raasay House that was home to the Macleod chiefs of Raasay was burned to the ground by Hanoverian troops in 1746 after the Battle of Culloden, along with the homes of Macleod clansfolk.

This was retribution for Macleod of Raasay coming out for Bonnie Prince Charlie, who crossed briefly to Raasay while he was on the run.

- It was rebuilt in time to receive diarist James Boswell and essayist Samuel Johnson during their celebrated Tour of the Hebrides in 1773. Dr Johnson, the great man of English letters, described it as "a neat, modern fabrick".

- The artist and engraver William Daniell (1769- 1837) was more impressed, sufficiently so to devote one of his celebrated prints to the back of Raasay House looking over to the Braes area of Skye.

- In the 1960s, Raasay House and other properties were acquired by the Sussex-based Dr John Green, who earned the nickname Dr No for obstructing local initiatives including the introduction of the first car ferry to Skye. The obvious spot was in front of the Raasay House where the shore forms almost a natural harbour. It had been used as a landing place for centuries.

- A public inquiry in 1973 agreed but the ferry terminal went to the old Iron Works Pier at Suisnish to the south of the island, a far more exposed location. A replacement slip is finally being built in front of Raasay House.

- Green, who set foot on the island only twice, sold his Raasay properties including Raasay House to HIE 's predecessor, the Highlands and Islands Development Board, in 1979 for £135,000 -

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