

Íslendingabók – 10 Years of Icelandic Exchanges!

It is hard to believe that ten years have passed since the signing of the Twinning agreement between our two associations. Iceland was always a place of mystery and fable. A place where the world was young and raw and probably at the end of the known world! All exotic and “foreign”.

Scotland and Iceland, being small countries, have always looked outwards; not content to be contained within their own shores. So, it is not surprising that during the first IRF Congress in Zakopane in Poland those delegates from the two countries got chatting and discovered strong, common cultural, social, historical and professional links. Carol Huston with Steinunn Ásmundsdóttir and Guðrún Kristinsdóttir recognised the connections and together forged the informal discussions into a formal relationship. Given the communication problems – e-mail was still in its infancy – it is then with some merit to both associations that a formal agreement was in place within one year of the Zakopane conference.

It was agreed that a band of SCRA members would travel to Iceland in May 1996, supported by SNH, to undertake a study tour, which would finish in the signing of a Twinning Document in a ceremony in Reykjavik.

Now there are, as always, two sides to each story. Both of which are obviously true, but to which is real depends very much upon who's listening.

The first trip was a great success with contact made with colleagues in Iceland, right up to the Minister of Environment and with good support from SNH Chairman Magnus Magnusson and the British Ambassador. National Parks were walked; interpretation centres were visited and research centres taken in. Sensible questions were dutifully asked and much was learned and many, many miles were travelled.

But perhaps the real story is ... On our first night Steina took us to Þingvallavatni to drink the waters as they emerged from the volcanic ground; we slept in the staff house at Þingvillar; bought fresh (very fresh) trout from a local farmer; quietly visited a small knoll where the elves live (just in case?) and our new friends sang close harmony songs well into the evening. We could sing nane!

And so it went on for seven days and nights – probably had less than twenty-four hours sleep in the whole week! We were privileged to see this exciting new country through the eyes of the natives. We were given insights that only be dreamed of by the casual visitor. We learned about the customs; the food - all of us trying to outdo the other - we learned about Brennivín and how to enjoy it properly!

A party of Icelanders being driven around Scotland in a minibus with no exhaust and probably no battery either followed this visit! “Come and visit our country and push minibuses up hill”.

All proposed Scottish National Park areas were visited as were the big cities and urban fringe areas too. That September we had the best weather of the year. After a summer of rain, I can remember getting sunstroke in Glen Nevis. The raising of the standard in Glenfinnan in 1745, being brought to life by Jock MacGillivray was a highlight. The tour finished with Ceilidhs and broken windows! Don't they always?

Then the first exchange – Marion Mulholland from Fife Ranger Service going all the way to Jökulsárgljúfur National Park and Hildur Þorsdóttir coming to exotic Dunfermline! For six weeks they beavered away in each other's job and survived to tell the tale. Three more exchanges have taken place, though not without their problems, and all have demonstrated the strong and persistent relationships between the two countries – so it was not just a flash in the pan! And here we are now celebrating ten short years of this still unique relationship between Rangers in two countries.

So what's the outcome of all this? Iceland has become a familiar place, not at all foreign at all, but still mysterious and exotic. Peopled with good and long lasting friends and colleagues. The challenge now is make it continue into the future with another generation of Rangers continuing the links and hopefully the tenth anniversary celebration will re-motivate us all to go on.

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