

# Museum, Landscape and the Storytelling Space Between<sup>i</sup>

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As both anthropologist and film-maker, I have long been interested in the relationship between landscape and narrative, and with the ways in which cultural landscapes come to be narrated. This ranges from informal, conversational narrations of everyday places through to 'official' or 'authorised' narrations of heritage sites and monuments. In Scotland, where much of my research has been conducted, there is sometimes a tendency for heritage managers to regard the landscape as if it were a museum, where objects are labelled and displayed for the 'education' of particular audiences. Such overt interpretation is, I argue, intrusive and erosive of a sense of place. In 2000 I was invited to devise and implement a new landscape interpretation strategy for Dunbeath Preservation Trust in Caithness, and in this article I provide an account of the project, explaining how we sought to foster a more symbiotic relationship between landscape, museum and storytelling.

The museum is, of course, a site of many functions, including collecting, cataloguing, conserving, and so forth, but I am concerned here with a particular approach to its exhibitionary function: what we might call 'narrative display'. Such an approach is epitomised in the new Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh and entails the appropriation of the object to serve a predetermined narrative schema. Thus, in an account of the development of the Museum of Scotland its script co-ordinator describes a process whereby the semantic potential of an object is reduced to tell a particular story – in this case, 'the story of a nation'.

*There is often a very understandable curatorial tendency to want to tell the public everything there is to know about any given object. But our objects were to be presented as part of a story, so we felt it was important that we confined ourselves to information relevant to that story.<sup>ii</sup>*

The museum's script co-ordinator goes on to describe how texts had to be

carefully edited of ambiguity to ensure maximum accessibility across a range of audiences. Now, whether one subscribes to this overtly thematic approach to museum design or not, it is reasonable to argue that the museum display is primarily a technology of communication and one that does not substantially alter the object itself, only its context. One can label and explain, juxtapose and coerce an object within a display to tell any number of stories, but the object itself remains essentially unchanged and ultimately impervious to the stories spun around it. The same cannot, however, be said of landscapes, which suffer similar labels and explanations.

This 'museumification' of the cultural landscape has meant that our experience of place has become increasingly mediated, orchestrated and, I would argue, diminished by what David Lowenthal describes as the 'paraphernalia of display'.<sup>iii</sup> Like objects in the Museum of Scotland, our landscapes become subjected to the editorial attentions of heritage experts who, on interpretative panels, must pare away complexity and ambiguity and that which does not conform to a coherent story or the limited attention span of some postulated target audience. If we are agreed as to the benefits of such interpretative strategies – ease of access, democratization of specialist knowledges, marketability – then I would like to ask what is sacrificed in pursuit of these goals and, more importantly, whether there are not ways of achieving such gains without incurring such losses? Through such practices are we not guilty of altering our landscapes in the most prosaic fashion in order to narrate them, thus eroding their semantic potential, their capacity to mean, to evoke, to inspire?

John Urry argues that travel and tourism are the quintessential experiences of modernity. The modern view of the landscape is thus epitomized in the 'tourist gaze': a gaze that is mobile and rootless, restless and ever-hungry from new experiences. It feeds on a diet of convenience and instant gratification. It has no time to

linger, and therefore can consume only that which can be easily digested. Despite its superficiality, this touring culture has a profound effect on the landscape, as places visited 'come to be remade... as objects for the tourist gaze'.<sup>iv</sup>

I suggest that the too-literal approach to storytelling in the landscape, which characterises so many heritage interpretation strategies, is predicated on an uncritical acceptance of the 'tourist gaze' as the inevitably dominant modern view. There are, I suggest, other modern views, even other modern touristic views; reactions, perhaps, to the perceived artifice of 'heritage' as theme park, resistances to the orchestrated experiences constructed by the tourist industry, practices reflecting a desire in people to discover something 'real' for themselves. My recent research has been concerned with journeys made by people of Scottish descent living overseas to their ancestral homelands in search of their 'roots'. Many such homecomers feel aggrieved when they are described as 'tourists' and instead define their journeys in terms of pilgrimage and quest.<sup>v</sup> Witness also the revival in other cultural journeys, perceived by those undertaking them as something other than and even opposed to the consumerism associated with tourism: the contemporary reanimation of the medieval pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela, for example.<sup>vi</sup> These journeys involve hardships and discomforts, inconveniences and frustrations, but these difficulties are willingly accepted in the knowledge that often through effort comes reward: a knowledge that travel was once travail.

The image of the labyrinth comes to mind. That complex symbol of the journey of life: labor intus – to labour within. T. S. Eliot writes,

*In order to arrive at what you do not know*

*You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance.<sup>vii</sup>*

The path through the labyrinth – let us say from ignorance to knowledge – is essentially plural and circuitous, involving detours, delays and diversions. The process is not unlike that of archaeological excavation and interpretation: we come at a problem from different directions, treading the same ground again and again, testing our hypotheses against the equivocal material record. We neither



expect nor desire the process to be easy, and indeed it is this process of discovery that we find rewarding. I suggest that we need to safeguard this sense of discovery with regard to our cultural landscapes: to be more imaginative in our ways of telling and narrating place, and not be afraid of making demands of visitors – provoking active, creative engagements, not merely facilitating passive consumption.

I suggest that our landscapes ought to remain open texts, unencumbered by reductive labels and displays. Instead, I believe that we need to make fuller use of other storytelling spaces – museums and heritage centres, for instance – to encourage visitors to discover for themselves the rich palimpsest of narratives inscribed within any landscape. In other words, I feel we should respect the boundaries between the museum, as explicit storytelling space, and the landscape itself where such narratives ought to remain implicit.

An opportunity to put into practice such a policy arose in 2000 when Dunbeath Preservation Trust invited me to design and implement a new interpretation strategy for its heritage centre as part of a redevelopment scheme.<sup>viii</sup> In the second part of this article, I should therefore like to provide something of a guided tour of the redeveloped centre – now a fully registered museum – describing how we addressed some of the issues that I have been highlighting.

When we began planning the redevelopment of the heritage centre, we had a few basic objectives in mind. First, we wanted to create an interior environment that would encourage visitors to engage more fully with the landscape outside, to perceive that beyond its picturesque surface lay more complex significances. Second, we wanted to articulate the fact that the landscape could be seen through a multitude of perspectives, that the 'same' landscape could be perceived in disparate ways. Third, we wanted to create a space that would present opportunities for the telling of stories, a space that would provoke as many questions as it would provide answers and therefore encourage response and dialogue. We wanted to create a space which people could inhabit and use in different ways: a contemplative space, a research space, a learning space, an administrative space, a social space, a fun space, a special space. On several occasions, while I was working on the

project and living in Dunbeath, talking with local people who were not directly involved in the heritage centre, I would gather that the centre was not regarded as a place intended for the local community, but as something for tourists only (supporting Urry's argument that places come to be remade for the tourist gaze). I hope that we have created a space that will challenge this perception and be occupied by all. Last, we did not want to rely on visitors reading texts to engage with what we were attempting to articulate. We wanted to explore the poetics of the representation of place: to develop more effective and affective ways of telling. There were, of course, other more practical considerations: a relatively small budget, a need to retain some of the old displays and fixtures and yet integrate them into the new scheme, a requirement to create flexible spaces (one area, for instance, would have to function as both exhibition space and auditorium for evening lectures and slide shows).

Dunbeath is a small crofting and fishing community in Caithness, the northernmost county of mainland Scotland. Although the main settlement is now on the coast, in previous centuries Dunbeath's now deserted inland strath was relatively densely populated and the relics of past human activity are everywhere to be encountered, in intersecting layers of field boundaries, in chambered cairns, hut circles and brochs, in deserted cottages on the crests of ridges. Like any,

Dunbeath's landscape is richly storied and it is a privilege to walk the landscape in the company of local crofters or shepherds (or, for that matter, local archaeologists, geologists and botanists), to hear their particular tales of particular places... in the very places themselves.

To walk in the Dunbeath Strath is, however, also to walk in the literary landscape of Neil Gunn, one of the key writers of the Scottish literary renaissance of the 1930s. Neil Gunn was born in Dunbeath in 1890, the son of a successful fishing boat skipper. The heritage centre is located in the old school in which he studied. Although he moved away from the village at the age of twelve and never dwelt in Dunbeath again, he certainly dwelt on the place throughout his career, and the coastal village, its harbour and inland strath are the settings of many of his best known works. Indeed, few landscapes can have been written about either so prolifically or so sensitively as Dunbeath and its strath. In novels such as *Morning Tide*, *Sun Circle*, *Highland River*, *The Silver Darlings*, *Young Art* and *Old Hector* and *The Serpent*, Gunn powerfully evokes the capacity for place to 'mean' – and to mean simultaneously at the most social and the most personal levels.<sup>ix</sup> For Gunn, the Dunbeath Water – his *Highland River* – was an especially resonant metaphor and the journey to the river's source described in that novel presented us with a wonderful motif to



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Entrance lobby panel, Dunbeath Heritage Centre



## LAND OF SPIRIT AND REASON



The 'floor-map', Dunbeath Heritage Centre

draw upon in the design of the heritage centre's new exhibitions. For Gunn's young hero, Kenn, the Dunbeath Water is profoundly 'real', but as Douglas Gifford has noted, it is also profoundly symbolic, at once becoming a river of time, of memory, of humanity, of consciousness.<sup>x</sup>

In the entrance lobby of the centre, then, we wanted to establish the relationship between Dunbeath, the place, Neil Gunn, as an author born in the place, and Gunn's literary representation of that place. Our approach has generally been a graphic one, using the principles of collage, and, given the temporal nature of the visitor's progression around the displays, of montage too. Thus,

on entering the centre, the visitor is presented with two panels: one, pictured on page 3, a composite image of Dunbeath harbour, Gunn, Gunn's textual description of the harbour, and the covers of three of his books; this is juxtaposed with a second panel, entitled 'Other Landscapes' (the title taken from Gunn's last novel, and one of those pictured, *The Other Landscape*)<sup>xi</sup>. In a few words, this second panel provides the basic information about Gunn and his connection with Dunbeath, and describes Kenn's pilgrimage in *Highland River* to the source of the Dunbeath Water: that it was also a journey to the source of his cultural heritage and to the source of himself.

The panel concludes with a short, but significant, quote from the novel: 'Within, you will find the spirit of our River...'<sup>xii</sup> These words are echoed in the engraved glass of the door leading into the main exhibition room, transforming the quote into a personal invitation to the visitor to discover the spirit of 'our' place and hinting that the journey of discovery may be both 'inward' and 'outward'.

Crossing the threshold, the visitor is confronted with a serpentine image of the river, painted, burned and silver-leaved onto the floorboards (see left). A route through the exhibition is thus suggested – just as a route through the landscape is suggested by the course of the real river outside. The imagery of this 'floor-map', beautifully realized by Tim Chalk, is drawn from Gunn's evocation of Dunbeath's topography as it might appear to the buzzard as it circles above: 'From high overhead,' writes Gunn, 'the river in its strath must look like a mighty serpent, the tip of its tail behind the mountain, its open mouth to the sea.'<sup>xiii</sup> The design of the serpent's head was taken from a fragment of a fine eighth-century brooch found in Dunbeath in 1860, now in the custody of the National Museums of Scotland. The floor-map is peppered with quotes from *Highland River* together with more and less abstracted images of places which feature in the novel and which, of course, have their origin in the Dunbeath landscape itself.

The idea to create a kind of map on the floor had a number of influences. Primarily, the great pavement labyrinths of European cathedrals along which the devout could make a symbolic pilgrimage to Jerusalem, a symbolic journey of a symbolic journey. But I was also struck by the work of the District Six Museum in Cape Town. District Six was a multi-cultural area of the city razed to the ground at the height of the Apartheid era, its inhabitants resettled in segregated townships. A street map of the demolished neighbourhood has been painted onto the museum floor and those who were displaced are invited to add their memories to the map – reinscribing themselves into the place as it were<sup>xiv</sup>. I was also interested in other kinds of mapping: from the familiar iconography of the Ordnance Survey to the less familiar approaches of, say, Australian Aboriginal art in which landscape and narrative are embedded inextricably within the imagery. Between these two poles, were alternative

Photograph © Paul Basu



Western attempts to map narrative and place: I was particularly struck by the work of the artist Simon Lewty, especially his contribution to Common Ground's Parish Map project – 'Old Milverton'.<sup>xv</sup>

The floor-map subtly leads the visitor through an interior, representational, storytelling landscape. This is reflected in the images on the walls and glass panels. Thus, from the harbour in the lobby, the visitor passes further old photographs of places near the river's mouth – the castle, the school, the village, the mill and so forth – and on to a series of six large black and white photographs, leading one upstream and progressively nearer the river's source. Each of these is captioned with a quote from Highland River. Image and text stand in tension with one another, such that the visitor must make sense of the relationship – sometimes it is quite literal, in other cases more abstruse.

Embracing the source is a pair of sculpted benches, designed and built by Maggy Stead and the Tim Stead Workshop. These are formed from naturally curving slabs of oak, and each conceals a 'secret' puzzle for the inquiring mind to discover. Scorched black, their colour is redolent of the peat hags which scar the landscape near the source and of the ancient bog oak which one may come across here. (Whilst no oak trees grow in Dunbeath Strath these days, the place name, Dauchinderie – the Davoch of Derry – means the davoch of the oak wood, suggesting that it was not always so.)

Central to our strategy was the relationship between this interior space and the space beyond the windows – the Dunbeath landscape itself. This is accentuated through the use of static, black and white photographs, which contrast with the colourful and ever-changing views through the windows (see right). This has the effect of drawing in the landscape from outside. Especially powerful is the fact that one can see many of the features of the lower strath from the windows: the village, the house where Gunn was born, the mill, the broch, Chapel Hill, Cnoc na Maranaich with its standing stone and chambered cairn. Thus the visitor may be intrigued by the multiple representations of the broch, for example, within the heritage centre, may be fascinated to learn of local stories told about it or of its excavation in the nineteenth century, but even more thrilled when it is pointed out in the landscape and

they are encouraged to visit it for themselves. They venture forth with new insights – local knowledges as well as archaeological knowledges – and, as they approach, perhaps they will recall the quote which captioned its photograph: 'The mind that secretly quickened before a broch' (see back cover).<sup>xvi</sup>

Gunn immortalized Dunbeath's school in Highland River. It is through these same windows that his hero, Kenn, sat day-dreaming of the river while the master taught his pupils such irrelevancies as the names of Henry VIII's wives or the principal industries of English cities. Thus, etched, graffiti-like, into the window panes are quotes which call to the scene to mind – for those who know – and which provoke the question 'why?' in those who don't. Essential to the strategy we adopted was the knowledge that there would always be someone on hand to address such questions to: a volunteer or staff member, someone with their own stories of Dunbeath and even of Dunbeath school.

Dividing the two main exhibition spaces is an imposing cobalt-blue glass 'wall'. Like the floor-map, this was a collaboration between ourselves and one of a number of artists we commissioned to work with us on particular aspects of the centre: in this case, Alexander Hamilton. The process of finding sympathetic artists and then articulating our ambitions for each of the

displays was by no means easy. We had long discussions with Alex, for instance, concerning our desire to communicate the semantic as well as physical stratigraphy of landscape, the relationship between the 'cultural' and 'natural' environment, the course of the river through all. It was not until we walked – and talked – the landscape together that Alex was finally able to understand what we were getting at: then it all fell into place. He collected samples of mosses, lichens and wild flowers to photograph in his studio and, utilizing the translucence of glass and photographic film, produced a remarkable series of laminated panels which show features of the archaeological landscape – plans of hut circles, the broch, a long house and Bouilag Hill with its intersecting multi-period remains – emerging out of, and, indeed, retreating back into the natural. On one side of the wall, running through each of the panels, is etched the shape of a particular stretch of the river. Just as the dynamism of the actual landscape seems to reach through the windows into the main exhibition room, so the 'outside' is brought 'inside' through the play of light on and through Hamilton's installation, such that it constantly changes throughout the day and through the different seasons (see back cover). At certain times of the day the wall becomes quite literally a reflection of the landscape beyond the windows.

At the very heart of the landscape of Dunbeath's lower strath is Chapel Hill, a site which, according to a long-held local tradition, is considered to be the location of an early monastery known as 'The House of Peace'.<sup>xvii</sup> The hill, with its enigmatic radial walls, retains an aura of mystery and sanctity, and is still considered by many as a place 'set apart'. In 1996 this oral tradition was substantiated with the finding of an early seventh-century Pictish cross-slab among the ruins of a nineteenth-century croft building at Ballachly, less than 200 metres from the hill. Indeed, in many respects, it was this significant discovery that instigated the redevelopment project, and particularly the determination to upgrade the centre's curatorial resources and practices to qualify for registered museum status, thereby ensuring that the stone could be properly cared for and displayed locally and not removed to Edinburgh or Inverness at the first opportunity as is so often the case in the Highlands and Islands. Thus, just as Chapel



*Drawing in the landscape from outside. Monochrome photographs juxtaposed with the view through the windows, Dunbeath Heritage Centre*

Photograph © Paul Basu



## LAND OF SPIRIT AND REASON

Hill is at the 'spiritual' heart of the Dunbeath landscape, so the Ballachly Stone and the 'Shrine Room' we have created for its display are at the spiritual heart of the heritage centre. The challenge here was to create a quiet, still space for the stone which reflected the sense of sanctuary associated with Chapel Hill, which permitted visitors to encounter the stone free from the encumbrance of labels and interpretative panels (these are provided elsewhere), and which yet met the exacting standards demanded by modern curatorial practice. A small, stone-walled room was thus created with a simple barrelled ceiling, a shallow step, and a niche to house the stone (see back cover). The result is a contemplative space which evokes the mood of a primitive stone chapel, but in which there is, crucially, no suggestion of 'simulation'. Its tiled floor was created by a local potter, a response to the stone itself and to Neil Gunn's evocation of Chapel Hill in his book *The Silver Darlings*. As a child, Finn, the hero of the novel, would escape to the top of the hill, where he would find sanctuary within a circle of low flat stones – the foundations of what had been a small 'beehive' cell. The quote, 'describing the circle of sanctuary', is inscribed into the floor, and, appropriately enough, the best view of the Ballachly Stone is obtained by standing within the circular motif at its centre.

There are, of course, more conventional displays: a tableau of figures salvaged from the previous exhibition which we reconfigured against a massive photograph of the upper strath, a book-selling area, a computer terminal providing access to the Trust's web site and online archaeological database, a series of free-standing and wall-mounted panels.<sup>xviii</sup> One panel display, for example, is concerned with Dunbeath place-names and place-stories. Framed by the dialogue between Young Art and Old Hector quoted earlier, this features a composite of the First Edition Ordnance Survey sheets covering the full length of the Dunbeath Water. Here, then, is a topographically-accurate representation of the same landscape evoked in the floor-map. The 1871 OS map is fascinating in itself, but we have superimposed on this other, alternative kinds of knowledge: snippets of local place-lore, multiple and sometimes contradictory accounts of the same landscape feature, excerpts from the OS Object Name Books, place-name translations, and a key to common Gaelic place-name components so visitors can translate other names for

themselves. And, of course, the heritage centre is not just an exhibition space: it is also a study centre and an archive. Upstairs, we have created a research room which is often busy with 'roots-tourists' pursuing their family history research, children working on school projects and academic researchers working in any number of fields. It's a wonderful facility and one that visitors are encouraged to make use of.

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### Central to our strategy was the relationship between this interior space and the space beyond the windows

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At Dunbeath's heritage centre, we have attempted to draw attention to the distance between the representational, storytelling space of the museum and the landscape which it narrates. Outside the museum, the Dunbeath landscape, with its rich archaeology, remains an open text. Open, literally, to interpretation. This, I suggest, is the way it should be. Our cultural landscapes are not objects to be collected and displayed, reconfigured to suit our linear narratives, remade for the superficial tourist gaze and ease of consumption, but should be spaces where our minds as well as our bodies are free to wander and to wonder.

I hope this will not appear to be a naïve view. Tourism, as we know, is essential to the Scottish economy, and there is no doubt that the cultural landscape is one of Scotland's most important commodities. Money is available to encourage the exploitation of this resource: there is a compulsion to make 'heritage' ever more easily accessible and to capitalize on it – to make heritage work, in the jargon of tourism development 'experts'. But the cultural landscape is not an unlimited resource: it is being eroded by insensitivity. I believe there is a need to resist this 'develop or die' attitude towards heritage sites and instead struggle to come up with new, imaginative and, above all, sensitive ways of narrating our places and our pasts.

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i A longer version of this article was published as 'Museum/Landscape : Landscape/Museum – Exploring the boundaries in Dunbeath' in *Modern Views – Ancient Lands: New Work and Thought on Cultural Landscapes*, ed. by E. Carver & O. Lelong (Oxford: BAR British Series 377, 2004).

ii J. Calder, 'From artefact to audience: strategy for display and interpretation' in *Heritage and Museums: Shaping National Identity*, ed. by J. M. Fladmark (Shaftesbury: Donhead, 2000), p. 45.

iii D. Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 273.

iv J. Urry, *Consuming Places* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 164.

v See P. Basu, 'Route metaphors of 'roots-tourism' in the Scottish Highland diaspora' in *Reframing Pilgrimage: Cultures in Motion*, ed. by S. Coleman & J. Eade (London: Routledge, 2004).

vi See N. L. Frey, *Pilgrim Stories: On and Off the Road to Santiago* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

vii T. S. Eliot, 'East Coker', in *Collected Poems, 1909-1962* (London: Faber & Faber, 1974), p. 201. See also P. R. Doob, *The Idea of the Labyrinth from Classical Antiquity to the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990); P. Basu, 'The labyrinthine aesthetic in contemporary museum design' in *Exhibition Experiments*, ed. by S. Macdonald & P. Basu (Oxford: Blackwell, forthcoming 2006).

viii Based in the old village school, Dunbeath Heritage Centre first opened in 1988 as a focus for the work of Dunbeath Preservation Trust. The Trust was established a few years earlier 'to explore, study, preserve and maintain the prehistoric and historic sites and structures of Dunbeath in harmony with the ongoing contemporary life of Dunbeath Village, the crofts, the grazings, the fishings, the grouse moors and the deer forest'. See A. Morrison, *Dunbeath: A Cultural Landscape* (Dunbeath: Dunbeath Preservation Trust; Glasgow: University of Glasgow, 1996), pp. 3-5. In addition to the Trust's own funds, the redevelopment project was supported by Caithness and Sutherland Enterprise, Highlands and Islands Enterprise, The Robertson Trust, Lloyds TSB Foundation for Scotland, and private donations.

ix N. M. Gunn, *Morning Tide* (Edinburgh: Porpoise, 1930); *Sun Circle* (Edinburgh: Porpoise, 1933); *Highland River* (Edinburgh: Porpoise, 1937; repr. Edinburgh: Canongate, 1996); *The Silver Darlings* (London: Faber & Faber, 1941); *The Serpent* (London, Faber & Faber, 1943).

x D. Gifford, Neil M. Gunn and Lewis Grassie Gibbon (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1983), pp. 33-35.

xi N. M. Gunn, *The Other Landscape* (London: Faber & Faber, 1954).

xii *Highland River*, p. 168.

xiii *Highland River*, p. 101.

xiv See C. Rassoul & S. Prosalendis, eds, *Recalling Community in Cape Town: Creating and Curating the District Six Museum* (Cape Town: District Six Museum, 2001).

xv S. Lewty, 'Parish Map (Old Milverton) 1986: Some notes in retrospect', in *From place to PLACE: maps and Parish Maps* ed. by S. Clifford and A. King (London: Common Ground, 1996).

xvi *Highland River*, p. 54.

xvii I. Banks and J. Hooper, *Chapel Hill, Ballachly, Dunbeath: A Survey of Early Christian Remains* (Glasgow: GUARD Report 419, 1998).

xviii The heritage centre's web site may be accessed at <http://www.dunbeath-heritage.org.uk>.





Photograph © Paul Basu



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Left: Multiple representations of Dunbeath broch, Dunbeath Heritage Centre

Above: The shrine room, Dunbeath Heritage Centre

Below: Landscape and light. Alexander Hamilton's glass installation, Dunbeath Heritage Centre



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