

## Roman Wall no barrier to Distillery

Whisky had been distilled at the Rosebank Distillery for 200 years, its “triple still” malt whisky being particularly prized by connoisseurs.

But seventeen years ago the famous distillery closed its doors.

Nurturing an ambition to resume whisky distilling in Falkirk, a local entrepreneur, George Stewart, bought the Rosebank stills.

He drew up plans to build a new distillery on the edge of town, traditional in appearance yet designed as a working tourist attraction.

Little did Stewart know that his well-crafted plans would be scuppered by the re-entry into modern Scottish politics of a long-dead Roman Emperor.

Welcomed by the local community, the plans were opposed by council officials on technical grounds and, more significantly, the site was found to be near the original line of the Antonine Wall.

The second of two walls created by the Romans, its remains are less evident and much less visited than the better-known Hadrian’s Wall. Road works and other development had long ago obliterated any remains that might have existed in Falkirk.

Nevertheless, the entire Antonine Wall had recently been granted World Heritage Site status by UNESCO.

With local elected councillors minded to grant the distillery planning permission, officers advised that the case should be referred to the Scottish Government.

In September 2009, the Scottish Government, on the advice of Historic Scotland whose experts were publicly opposed to any development near the Wall, ordered a Public Inquiry.

Determined that his dream should not evaporate, George Stewart called in Pagoda to help secure planning consent.

### Strategy

With a 12-week window before the start of the Public Inquiry - and the imperative of respecting this quasi-judicial process - the brief called for a clear, simple strategy: **to influence those who might influence the eventual decision.**

- **Make a virtue out of the controversy**

We started with two “knowns”. One – promotion of the Wall is a requirement of World Heritage Site status – and therefore represents an obligation on Historic Scotland. And two – Stewart had already planned that the distillery site would include a visitor centre of some sort.

So, one of Pagoda’s directors re-kindled an interest he first nurtured as a 16-year old school boy when he won a prize for his project on the Wall. He researched and then developed **an idea: for George Stewart to build the first Antonine Wall Interpretation Centre in Scotland, alongside his new distillery.**

This would add significant weight to the case for granting planning permission and help Historic Scotland fulfil its obligations to UNESCO.

***If Historic Scotland could be convinced, they might even persuade Scottish Government to drop the Public Inquiry.***

- **Honest brokers**

The £5m project would create 87 full time jobs. With a General Election looming, local politicians were eyeing the project and assessing how – and when – to make political capital out of it.

If the Public Inquiry did go ahead in December 2009, the Reporter would have to publish his findings in early 2010. Any subsequent review of his findings by Ministers – and any decision they might make to overrule him – could therefore come at a politically sensitive time.

**Creating a cross-Party coalition in favour of the project would give Ministers political cover for any decision that might be regarded as controversial.**

## **Implementation**

We put our idea for an Antonine Wall Interpretation Centre to George Stewart who recognised immediately how it might enhance his plans to attract visitors to the distillery.

We arranged a site meeting with Dr Malcolm Cooper, the recently-appointed Chief Inspector of Historic Scotland.

Meanwhile, we shared the Interpretation Centre idea with the lawyers who George Stewart had appointed to prepare his submission, should the Public Inquiry go ahead.

At the meeting with Dr Cooper (who was accompanied by the council's case officer, also firmly opposed to the development) the offer was made to build an Interpretation Centre and to recreate a section of the military way which originally ran behind the Wall.

Discussions were cordial and, initially, hopes were raised. However, Historic Scotland had made so much of their opposition to the site – perhaps because they saw it as a test case – that it proved impossible for them to climb down without losing face.

**We quickly moved to implement the second part of the strategy.**

Having identified a local MSP\* of each of main political party, we offered them an individual briefing and a site visit.

With development at a standstill because of the credit crunch, they were keen to publicly support a new project which would bring new jobs.

However, believing that more could be achieved by keeping a low profile, we persuaded them that there should be no media comment.

Instead, we drafted a joint letter of support and asked all four MSPs to sign it. We ensured it was printed on Scottish Parliament letterhead, to get the personal attention of Ministers.

\*MSP stands for Member of Scottish Parliament. There are 129 MSPs in total. They are the primary targets for public affairs activity for influencing decisions made at a local council level on major or controversial planning applications/decisions

The Public Inquiry went ahead and George Stewart was called to give evidence. Presenting his case – and the Interpretation Centre idea – in public, **allowed George Stewart to be seen to be taking the initiative on economic development and heritage protection**, in a way that the statutory bodies were not.

## **Creative Input**

The World Heritage Site status of the Antonine Wall was so recent that no serious thought had been given to its promotion.

**Our idea for an Interpretation Centre – the first ever in Scotland – allowed George Stewart to demonstrate his willingness to help the statutory bodies fulfil their international obligations.**

By encouraging the MSPs to put aside their party differences, we secured a way of **providing political cover for Ministers** and persuaded people, normally hungry for publicity, to go without despite the fact that the General Election was only four months away.

## **Evaluation**

The first part of our strategy – convincing Historic Scotland - did not succeed, so we focused our efforts on **building and maintaining an all-party political coalition in favour** of the project.

The joint letter we prepared **reached the desks of Scottish Government Ministers**: we believe it helped to secure the subsequent Ministerial Review of the Inquiry.

**The Interpretation Centre idea was quoted extensively by the lawyers in their formal submission to the Inquiry**, to show how flexible George Stewart was prepared to be to accommodate Historic Scotland's concerns.

Although the Reporter at the Public Inquiry recommended that the project should be refused permission, **Ministers overruled him following a Review, stating that the potential for job creation and tourism outweighed local planning considerations.**

## **Cost effectiveness**

Our consultancy fees of £7,500 represent an excellent ROI, when set against the possibility that this £5m project might have been thwarted.

## **Final results against objectives**

In a nutshell this project achieved its primary objective: the distillery project was granted planning permission in May and the development, complete with Interpretation Centre, starts on site in the autumn.

## **Total Budget**

a) £0 - £10k