



REGENERATION AND RENEWAL OF  
**BLAIRS COLLEGE**



## ➔ Introduction

Blairs College, which lies 4 miles from Aberdeen within the Kincardine & Mearns area of Aberdeenshire, is a prestigious listed buildings complex of huge historical importance. From 1829 up until 1986 Blairs College acted as a seminary school, training young Scots on the path to becoming priests. In 1986 the seminary closed due to falling numbers and economic circumstances, and was subsequently bought by the Muir Group.

The Muir Group want to return Blairs College to its former glory. We have brought forward an enabling development, which proposes to develop some of the surrounding land to generate funds to restore the college and transform it into a vibrant hotel, leisure and conference centre. As well as preserving the wonderful architecture of the College, the development will also help ensure the future of the many treasured artefacts that are currently kept at the Blairs Museum, including the Memorial Portrait of Mary Queen of Scots.

The proposed development represents a £115million capital investment opportunity for the area and could create nearly 1,000 new jobs.

There is a strong “sense of place” about Blairs, reflecting its long history and the community that existed there for so many years, forming the landscape setting and living their lives within it. This proposal is not so much about creating a new community, but more about restoring a community, and moving Blairs forward to a bright new future.



## ➔ History of Blairs College

Situated by the River Dee in historic Kincardineshire, Blairs College is steeped in Scottish history. Originally owned by the Knights Hospitalers' of St. John of Jerusalem, the land passed to the devout Roman Catholic Menzies family in 1542.

After the reformation in the mid 16th Century, it became dangerous to train as a priest. This carried on nonetheless in secret seminaries at Scalan in the Braes of Glenlivet, and latterly at Aquhorties. It was against this backdrop that the College at Blairs came into being, where young men were educated for the priesthood while enjoying a classical boarding education. Boys would begin their training in Scotland, usually furthering their studies in one of the Scots colleges in Europe.

In 1827, John Menzies of Pitfodels, the last of his line and in poor health, gifted the Estate at Blairs to the Bishops of the Roman Catholic Church in Scotland. With Reverend Charles Gordon, John Menzies oversaw the transformation of the original buildings into a seminary with facilities for 25 pupils and priests. The Blairs community was then established in 1829, shortly after full Catholic emancipation.

Due to growing numbers a new three-storey college was opened in 1897, and was quickly followed by a new chapel. The chapel is still in use today, with an active congregation.

At its height the College accommodated 250 boys aged 12-17, supported by 15 priests, resident nuns, as well as a tailor, cobbler and many other traders. In total it is thought that at this time the complex and support staff may have totalled a community of over 400 people.

In 1986 the seminary closed due to falling numbers and economic circumstances, and was then bought by the Muir Group.

The Muir Group have come forward with an enabling development for the Blairs Estate, which will generate the income necessary to regenerate the existing buildings and secure the future of this historical estate for Aberdeenshire. The present buildings are in desperate need of renovation.

**The Original House:** Consisting of the historical Menzies Building and Theatre, and suffering from the worst dilapidation.

**The Farm Steadings:** These buildings are of a substantial scale and have fallen into a state of disrepair over the years.

**The New College Complex:** Mostly disused and some areas are beginning to break down and show signs of serious deterioration. The fabric of the building is still re-usable and will be robust enough to withstand the conversion into a high quality Hotel and Conference Centre.



St. Mary's Chapel



## → The Blairs Museum

For over 170 years Blairs College was home to a magnificent collection of paintings, vestments, silver and Jacobite memorabilia belonging to the Scottish Roman Catholic Church. When the College closed in 1986 a trust was set up to preserve and exhibit this important collection.

The Blairs Museum, overseen by the Scottish Catholic Heritage Commission, currently houses a remarkable collection of treasures rarely seen by the outside world. These include fine embroidered vestments dating from the 15th century and gold and silver church metal work. The most famous of the items available to view are from the house of Stuart:

- The Mary Queen of Scots Memorial Portrait, painted after her execution and saved from the mob during the French Revolution by being hidden up a chimney!
- A miniature portrait of Mary Queen of Scots, one of only four painted while she was imprisoned.

- A glorious portrait of the “Old Pretender” James Francis Edward Stuart, painted by Antonio David in 1723.
- A beautiful enamelled watch featuring a portrait of Bonnie Prince Charlie’s daughter, Charlotte, Duchess of Albany.

As the structure of Blairs College continues to deteriorate, there is a danger that this enviable collection will have to leave Aberdeen, and possibly Scotland. The enabling development proposed by the Muir Group will secure the future of the Blairs Estate, and help ensure that this valuable collection is able to remain in the North East of Scotland.



Memorial Portrait of Mary Queen of Scots

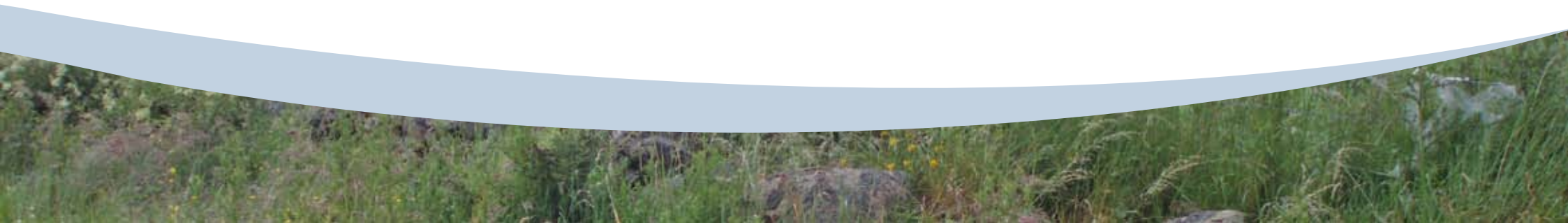
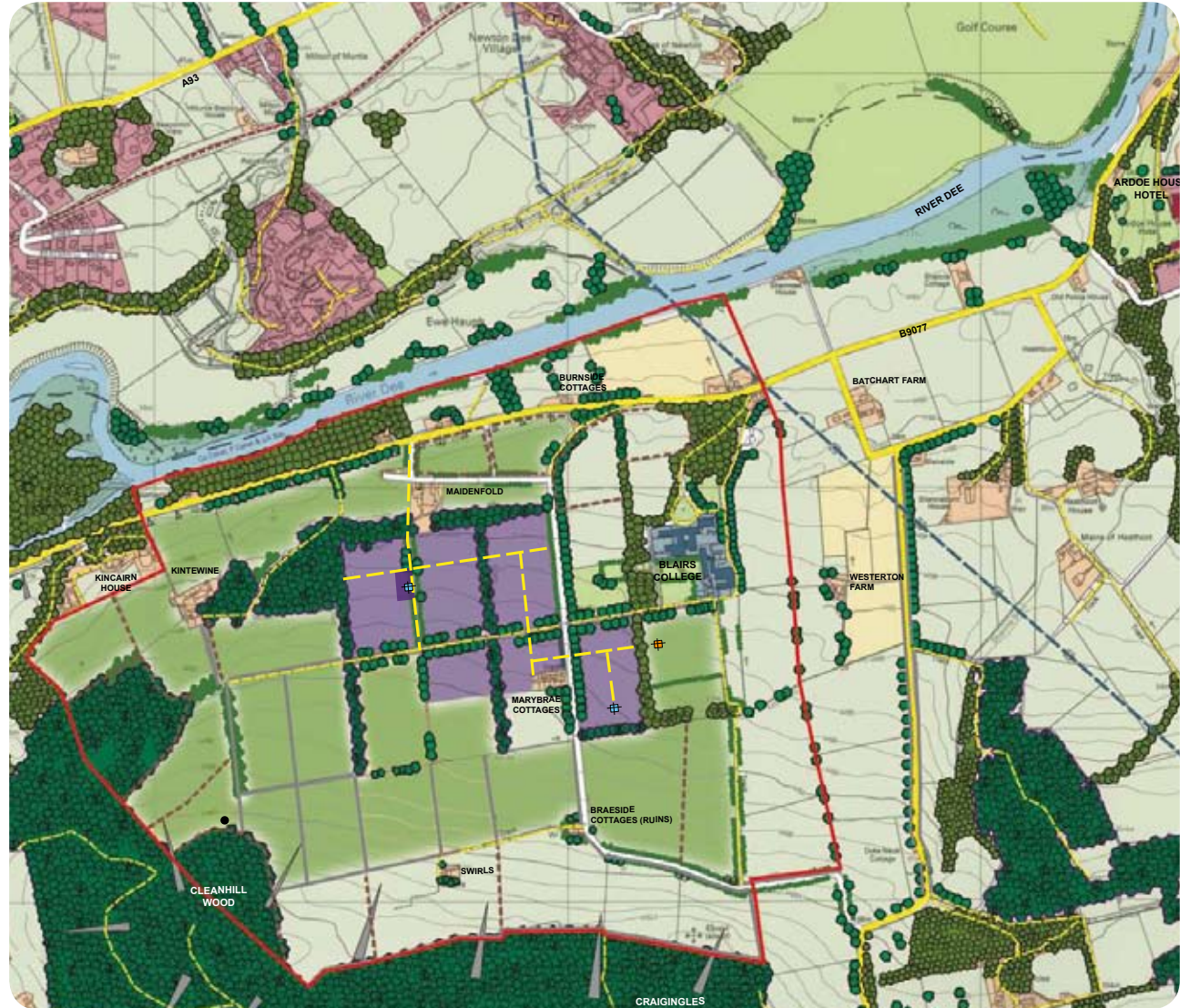


## ➔ The Enabling Development

The Muir Group proposes a carefully integrated scheme to regenerate the Blairs Estate. Private housing development will fund infrastructure, affordable housing and leisure facilities including a championship golf course to be designed by Paul Lawrie in association with European Golf Design, and will act as an enabling development for the re-use of the listed Blairs College as a hotel.

### LEGEND

- Site Boundary
- Extent Of Development Footprint
- Primary Infrastructure/Roads
- Extent Of Proposed Golf Course
- + Focal Points
- + Club House
- Telecommunications Mast



**The enabling development will include a number of benefits for the community and wider Aberdeenshire area including new homes, a luxury hotel, the retention of the Blairs Museum and new sporting facilities.**

### ➔ Opportunities for Tourism

Tourism is a major industry in Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire and accounts for 9% of the workforce. In 2005 UK residents took 1.6million tourist trips to Aberdeen and Grampian and spent nearly £300million.

Aberdeen has the fastest-growing hotel market in the UK outside London, but there is a desperate lack of quality hotel accommodation. Whilst it is essential to preserve those aspects of the area that attract visitors it is vital to also provide the necessary accommodation and facilities.

The linchpin of the proposals for the Blairs Estate is to re-use the listed, main buildings as a luxury 4 or 5 star hotel. The complex would include at least 150 bedrooms, health club, and restaurant and conference facilities. By helping ensure the future of the Blairs Museum, along with the creation of new sporting facilities, such as fishing, clay shoots, curling and horse riding, the development will increase tourism in the local area, which will help the local economy.

### ➔ Opportunities for Golf

Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire are world-class golf destinations and therefore well placed to exploit global interest in the sport.

‘A Profile of Golf in Scotland’, published by Sport Scotland in 2002, advised that half of clubs had waiting lists for membership.

An 18-hole golf course at Blairs therefore has the potential to meet the demands of local residents and tourists alike.

The Muir Group is proposing to develop a signature championship golf course designed by Paul Lawrie in association with European Golf Design.

### ➔ Opportunities for Housing

A total of 280 homes are proposed to be built within the College grounds. This will include provision for much needed affordable housing for the local area.

220 dwellings will be developed by Muir Homes, whilst the 60 affordable houses will be provided by a registered social landlord (RSL) through the planned transfer of serviced housing land from the current owner to the selected RSL.

The provision of these homes will help contribute to overall housing supply within a market experiencing a strong demand and constrained supply.



## ➔ Investment for Aberdeenshire

**The enabling development brought forward by the Muir Group represents an exciting investment opportunity. The Muir Group commissioned Ryden Property Consultants to carry out a development impact appraisal that highlighted the many benefits the development will bring for the local economy.**

### Capital Investment

Over the ten-year period of the development, capital investment will be £115million, or £11.5million a year. This level of expenditure would support an average of 212 full time equivalent jobs for the duration of the project.

### Resident expenditure

The residents of Blairs College will provide additional retail and leisure expenditure. In total this expenditure is estimated at £1million per annum by 2017. These figures are net of the effect of households simply relocating from elsewhere in Aberdeenshire.

The residents will also be required to pay Council Tax. Based on current rates, and taking into account affordable housing residents and that 40% of residents are assumed to be relocating within

Aberdeenshire, an additional £0.4million per annum would be generated for Aberdeenshire Council by 2017.

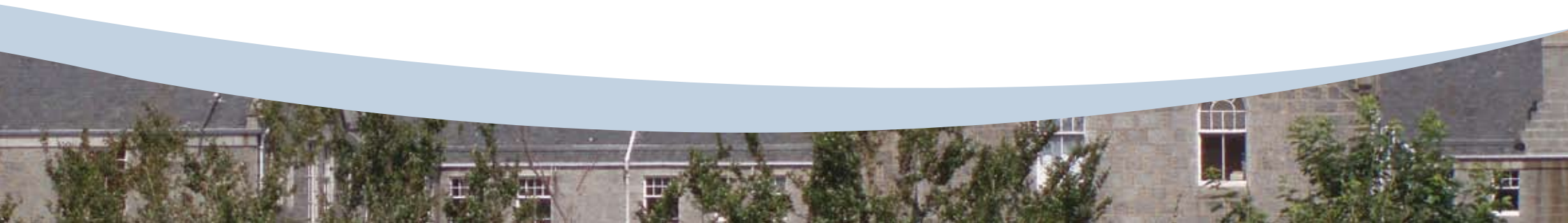
There would also be a demand for other services such as domestic services, which could generate 20 additional local service jobs by 2017.

### Tourism expenditure

An occupancy rate of 66%, the average for Aberdeen and Grampian, of 300 beds gives a total of 72,270 bednights a year. Based on these figures, the annual expenditure generated by the hotel is £18million and includes off-site expenditure by hotel guests. This income could generate 664 jobs including direct jobs within the hotel as well as indirect jobs such as suppliers, transport services and off-site retail expenditure.

### Golf Expenditure

It is anticipated that income from a golf course will be roughly £0.75 million per year, with total employment in the region of 28 jobs.



## ➔ Development Time Line

The regeneration of the Blairs Estate would take ten years to complete. The following phasing of the development is proposed over that time:

- **Phase 1:** Infrastructure, drainage and services investment, 20% of housing.
- **Phase 2:** Golf course shaping and seeding, more infrastructure, 20% of housing.
- **Phase 3:** Infrastructure, golf course maintenance, 20% of housing.
- **Phase 4:** Infrastructure, club house, 20% of housing.
- **Phase 5:** Infrastructure, bridle paths, 20% of housing.

It is also assumed that initial works on the conversion of the main buildings to a hotel commences with the first phase of housing.

As plans for Blairs College are formalised and implemented, further development proposals can be anticipated, potentially including:

- Options for the re-use of the former theatre. The 200-seat venue could be re-used as a small theatre, cinema, conference venue, or other use.
- The existing museum can be re-launched within the wider development to attract increased visitors.
- The existing estate cottages could be re-used.

## ➔ About the Muir Group

The J W Muir Group is a family owned and run group of limited companies, Muir Construction, Muir Homes, Muir Timber Systems, Muir Leisure, Hermiston Securities and Muir Property Investments, headed by Group Chairman and founder John Muir. The Group, based in Inverkeithing, is one of Scotland's largest, privately owned companies with an enviable track record in Design Build, Negotiation, Traditional, Partnering and Management Contracts, resulting in multimillion-pound developments throughout Scotland and Northern England. Operating markets include retail, residential, industrial, offices, leisure, social housing and public sector. The Muir Group recognises market trends and anticipates future demands of industry and commerce to maintain its position at the forefront of Scottish building. [www.muirgroup.co.uk](http://www.muirgroup.co.uk)

## ➔ Further Information:

If you would like more information on the proposals outlined in this brochure, please contact us on our community information line, email or write to us at the address shown below.

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