

ANGUS OG

AND THE ENVIRONMENT

CLIMATE CHANGE

Ewen Bain explicitly addresses climate change in several of the Angus Og Adventures. One of the earliest examples is *Angus Og and the Drambeg Drouth* from 1966, a time when scientific studies of climate change were relatively new and not widely discussed. *Angus Og and the Short Hot Summer*, published in 1971 highlights the role played by burning fossil fuels and the potential impact of climate change in the Scottish Highlands. In this story Angus and Lachie find a barrel of whisky that has fallen off the back of a lorry. They hide it in the peat stack at the Og's house, but it breaks and the whisky soaks into the peats. The whisky-soaked peat burns so strongly that it changes the climate on Drambeg. Angus sells it to all his neighbours and soon they are growing bananas, grapes and olives. The tropical heat leads to a tourist boom but also to giant midges. The island gets so hot that bogs boil and Ben Oovi erupts like a volcano. Mrs Og tells Angus to throw the peat away in River Oovi but this leads to pollution in the river.

LITTER

The first UK Litter Act was introduced in 1958, the 1960s saw the launch of Keep Britain Tidy's Tidyman logo and campaigns featuring celebrities were common throughout the 1970s and 80s as litter was increasingly viewed as an environmental concern. This is reflected in several Angus Og stories with Ewen Bain highlighting aspects of litter management particularly relevant to the Highlands and Islands

including the impact of tourism and the relatively late introduction of municipal household refuse collections in rural and island communities.

POLLUTION

Ewen Bain demonstrates the impact of air pollution and of toxic substances polluting land and water in a number of Angus Og stories. These stories often demonstrate an awareness of the political implications of failing to address pollution both locally and globally. In *A Haggis Saga*, 1989, Angus says that 'Britain has caused enough pollution on the continent as it is' accompanied by a drawing of acid rain polluting rivers and killing trees. In *Angus Og and the Grey Seals* 1970, the people of Drambeg hold a meeting to discuss how to clean away tar from the rocks as the 'dear little whelks and crabs suffer from the continued pollution of our Drambeg Shores' in an episode likely inspired by the Santa Barbara Oil Spill of 1969 that also inspired the first Earth Day and much of the modern environmental movement.

NUCLEAR

Throughout the 1950s the UK was gripped by a very real fear of nuclear conflict and growing concern and protest at the health risks and environmental damage caused by atmospheric nuclear testing. The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament was founded in 1958 and anti-nuclear protest was common throughout the 1960s particularly following the establishment of British-built nuclear weapons and submarines at Faslane. Ewen Bain reflects national and global events of the Cold War nuclear era throughout the stories with particularly insightful content when the cartoons relate to local concerns such as the potential impact of proposed nuclear waste storage at sites in the

Highlands and Islands and activity at the MOD Hebrides Range. In Angus Og and the By-Election Angus is elected to the Drambeg Council to fight against the Department of Nuclear Waste's plan to create a nuclear midden on Drambeg. A passion potion that Mairileen has bought from Granny McBrochan is accidentally disposed of at the proposed site for the nuclear midden and it turns the midges into aggressive, super-sized insects which frighten off the men from the Department of Nuclear Waste and put an end to plans to use Drambeg as a site for nuclear waste storage.

BIODIVERSITY

The World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) was established in 1961 with the aim of "stopping the degradation of the planet's natural environment and to build a future in which humans live in harmony with nature". This coincided with a growing awareness of wider environmental and nature-based concerns reflected in the Angus Og adventures where Ewen Bain demonstrates an early awareness of the interconnectivity of climate change and species loss or the introduction of new, invasive species. In *The Peat Eaters* Ewen explores the impact on the island community of Drambeg of the arrival of a rare bird species that only eats peat. The story reflects concerns amongst crofters in the Western Isles about the impact of increasing populations of Greylag Geese at the time. In 1986 it was estimated that there were around 700-800 breeding pairs in the UK, of which around 150 were breeding in the Outer Hebrides. North Uist crofters were seeking to control the spread of Greylag geese which they claimed were causing them substantial agricultural losses even in the mid 1980s. By 2013 North and South Uist were year-round home to more than 10,000 greylag geese and the population was continually increasing.

LAND USE

The remit of The Land Reform Review Group, an independent review group established by the Scottish Government in 2012, stated that “The relationship between the land and the people of Scotland is fundamental to the wellbeing, economic success, environmental sustainability and social justice of the country”. This was recognised by Ewen Bain throughout the Angus Og cartoon series where issues of land ownership and access are often directly addressed either in response to contemporary events or as a reflection of a viewpoint supportive of community ownership and the right of access.

ECONOMIC

Climate change and environmental issues have a direct impact on many sectors of the national and global economy. Ewen Bain explored issues such as food supply security, water quality and availability, employment opportunities and energy supply security and efficiency raising important questions about who benefits from or is negatively impacted by economic decisions. These debates continue in contemporary discussions around the energy industry across the Highlands today.

POLITICS

The Angus Og Cartoon Strip was a satirical cartoon inspired by the political events of the day. Ewen Bain intended the cartoons to reflect contemporary attitudes towards political events and was never afraid to hold the government to account with government policy on the environment being no exception. In Angus Og and the Scientists, 1968 Angus memorably tells us that ‘it's always government policy to change their policy’.

LOCAL ACTIVISM

Ewen Bain highlights the importance of political activism and local engagement throughout the Angus Og cartoon series. Angus himself is often an instigator of local activism but Ewen also explores the nuances of public debate cleverly exploring whose voices are heard and whose are dismissed. Cartoons are, in a sense, the pulse of the feelings of the day – the quick gut reaction of cartoonists drawing their inspiration from public sentiment.

WATER

Ewen had very happy memories of his childhood in Glasgow where a favourite treat was a walk with his father to see the ships lined along the busy docks on Clydeside. Angus Og was also a regular visitor to the Clyde and Ewen Bain used the cartoon to highlight changes to the river including the decline of industry and the improvement of water quality by the Clyde River Purification Board. The Clyde River Purification Board, set up in 1956, culminated in the return of the salmon in 1983 and event celebrated by Ewen Bain in *The Kelpie* from the same year. In this story *The River Oovi* has been cleaned up so much that a Kelpie has taken up residence and it is causing trouble in Drambeg. Angus and Lachie decide to take the Kelpie to Glasgow as the Clyde River Purification Board has improved the river so much that the water is clean enough for a Kelpie. Ewen Bain received a Certificate from Clyde River Purification Board in recognition of the work he had done to raise the profile of their activities and the importance of maintaining clean water ways, a topical discussion today.

ELECTRIC

On 26 January 2024, the Scottish Government confirmed that Scotland generated the equivalent of 113% of Scotland's electricity consumption from renewable energy sources, making it the highest percentage figure ever recorded for renewable energy production in Scotland. Scotland's renewable generation comes from onshore wind, hydropower, offshore wind, solar PV and biomass. Whilst much of Scotland's renewable energy production has been driven forwards in the 21st century Ewen Bain imagined many alternative sources of renewable energy long before in several Angus Og stories. Alongside the potential environmental impact of renewable energies Ewen also highlighted the potential for them to positively impact energy costs.

PEAT AND TREES

Peat soils cover more than 20% of Scotland and store around 1600 million tonnes of carbon. Current arguments suggest that keeping peatlands healthy is vital to tackling climate change although there is much debate about how this should be achieved particularly in the Highlands and Islands where cutting and using peat for fuel is part of a long-standing tradition and reflected in custom and culture. Ewen Bain seems to foresee these discussions in *The Peat Eaters* from 1985 where the Laird and his wife are more interested in the welfare of the peat eating birds than in the ability of the local crofters to maintain their traditional, and locally available source of energy. Similarly hints of current carbon offset projects can be seen in *The Space Trip Strip*, 1987.

OZONE

In the early 1980s scientists discovered a hole in the ozone layer over Antarctica caused by chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs)—long-lived chemicals that had been used in refrigerators and aerosol sprays since the 1930s. The ozone hole opened the world's eyes to the global effects of human activity on the atmosphere and this global recognition of the destructive potential of CFCs led to the 1987 Montreal Protocol, a treaty phasing out the production of ozone-depleting chemicals. This of course features in the Angus Og cartoon strip with ozone becoming a by-word for healthy air and Angus even suggesting that if they could get a haggis big enough they could use it to plug the hole.

OIL

Oil was discovered in the North Sea in 1966, with the first year of full production taking place in 1976. In 2021, Scotland accounted for 90% of the UK's sales value of oil and gas. The discovery of oil in Scottish waters has been intrinsically linked with debates around Scottish independence and it is no surprise to see these reflected in Angus Og and The Oil Well from 1975 where Ewen explicitly replicates the Scottish National Party 'It's Her Oil' poster campaign.

INVERNESS

Ewen Bain's fictional island of Drambeg was located in the Utter Hebrides and was well connected to the rest of the Highlands and Islands. Inverness, and particularly Loch Ness and its famous resident the Loch Ness monster appear throughout the Angus Og cartoons and in Ewen's one-off cartoons for other newspapers.

SELF-PORTRAITS

Occasionally Ewen Bain inserts himself into the cartoons with revealing self-portraits poking fun at himself when he finds he is struggling with writer's block or drawing something particularly challenging! Occasionally Ewen breaks the fourth wall and engages directly with the characters with Angus referring to him as 'the hand of fate'.

FURTHER INFORMATION

There were 158 Angus Og adventures and the collection of original strip cartoons has been donated to the Skye and Lochalsh Archive Centre in Portree.

<https://www.highlifehighland.com/skye-and-lochalsh-archive-centre/>

www.angusog.scot

Ewen also drew political cartoons which were mainly published in *the Scots Independent* <https://www.electricscotland.com/culture/features/bain/intro.htm>