

# MARGARET POOL

## A LIFELONG VISION REALISED

Having fallen in love with Langholm as a child, Margaret helped inspire a £6m community land buyout, which is restoring the small Scottish town for people and planet.

By Bobby Carter

I was just a month into my master's in Science Communication at the University of Bristol. How on earth did I end up at a traditional Scottish ceilidh, dancing with 50 strangers over 300 miles away? The answer lies in a special elderly woman, who left subtly after understatedly enjoying the night. Little does she realise (nor take credit for) the sheer joy she has brought to this community.



Photo: David Lintern, John Muir Trust

Margaret served as chair of the Langholm Initiative for 11 years (2011-2022).

### A diverse career

Margaret Pool was born in 1944 and raised in Falkirk, a then-industrial town in central Scotland. As a child, she frequently visited Langholm for the holidays, where her family would attend the annual Common Riding. This 260-year-old celebration happens every July, historically to maintain a road connecting the Langholm community to their beloved moor, through otherwise private land. The Langholm people have forged a deep cultural relationship with this land, on which they harvest peat, plants and stone to provide warmth, food and materials.

In 1964, aged 19, Margaret married a Langholm local and moved to the town. The couple would raise two children, and started their own agricultural business selling veterinary supplies to local farms. Margaret also worked on the School Board, and later as a Justice of the Peace. In the early 1990s, they sold their business (which continues to operate) and Margaret became a Community Councillor. She would serve for 12 years, latterly as chair, during which Langholm won the award for the Best Community of the Year in Scotland.

By the turn of the millennium, in her mid-fifties, Margaret's husband had passed away. After meeting (and eventually marrying) an old school friend who had moved to Australia, Margaret spent ten years commuting between Langholm and Brisbane. The death of her second husband in 2009 concluded this "too a brief but very happy" period, and saw Margaret permanently return to Langholm. In 2011, she joined the Langholm Initiative (LI), the town's community development trust, and was serving as chair when an incredible opportunity arose.



Langholm is situated eight miles north of the English border.

Map: Ordnance Survey



### An unmissable chance

In May 2019, the Langholm community were stunned to hear landowner Buccleuch Estates were to sell 25,000 acres of the moor. Given the community's passion for the land, the LI launched an ambitious fundraising campaign to raise £6m in return for 10,500 acres. Within just six months, Margaret and her team had raised £3.8m in donations from volunteers and partner organisations, securing 5,200 acres of land. This first half of the moor, including the area historically marked by the Common Riding, was formally transferred to the community in March 2021.

Following the success of the first buyout, Buccleuch Estates agreed to hold the final 5,300 acres of land off the open market, to allow the community to fundraise the remaining £2.2m. In October 2021, Margaret and her colleagues at the LI launched their second buyout. Nine months later, the community secured the second half of the moor, thanks to the generosity of people from all walks of life. Since July 2022, this land has been developed into the Tarras Valley Nature Reserve, which the Langholm community hope will restore the town to its former glory.

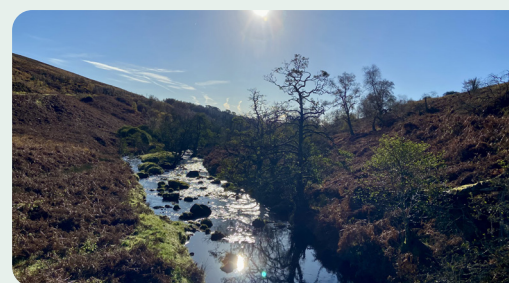
Langholm was historically known as the "Muckle Toon" for its growing population and bustling mills. But as its traditional industries declined from the 1980s, so did its population and local

economy. Community ownership of the moor has bred new life into Langholm's people, economy, and environment. The launch of the Tarras Valley Nature Reserve will help the community rekindle their love for the moor, and help cling onto their young via exciting new jobs. Alongside comprehensive habitat restoration, the future looks bright for Margaret's beloved town.

### "The future looks bright for Margaret's beloved town."

#### A special weekend

In October 2023, I visited Margaret together with three of my course mates at Bristol. Our project was to research unsung heroes in science; a title that would prove to embody Margaret. Not only had she promptly and generously responded to all our questions via email, but she graciously invited us all to stay in Langholm. The occasion: a ceilidh (a traditional Scottish party) to celebrate 100 years since the first ever community land buyout. So, after a nine-hour car journey, of engrossing stories and the obligatory "I'm Gonna Be (500 miles)" reprise, we hopped over the border to Langholm.



*A crisp autumn morning on the Langholm Moor.*

### "Our project was to research unsung heroes in science; a title that would prove to embody Margaret."

As the sun set, we pulled up at Margaret's house to be greeted by her enthusiastic dog, Hector. Margaret wore a stylish black and white jumper, and warmly welcomed us with hugs and our rooms for the night. She spoke softly but confidently as she prepared dinner, explaining how the community favours "ecological restoration" over the term "rewilding," to distance itself from the latter's connotations with predator reintroduction. After enjoying our best meal in weeks – of fish pie, roast potatoes, and vegetables – we walked over to the Langholm Social Club.

In our emails before the visit, Margaret had been remarkably humble regarding her role in the community land buyout. Her modesty shone through as I spoke to a few members of the LI while waiting at the bar. She couldn't even face our attempts to show her our project. We spent the night dancing arm-in-arm with the community, over a wonderful accordion and drums ensemble. The exhausting dances were interspersed with breaks for films, music, and poetry, which embodied the passion of this special community for their beloved moor.

After cooking us a wholesome breakfast the following morning, Margaret drove us to the moor to reconvene with the community. And as we walked amongst the vast uplands and gentle rivers, it was clear to see the peace and joy this buyout has brought. While Margaret realised her vision for Langholm as a child, it still today guides this place in living up to its potential.



*Photos: Langholm Social Club*

*I "danced" the night away with the Langholm community and my Bristol course mates.*

#### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Margaret for hosting us and for answering all our questions. Thanks also to the Langholm community for their wonderful hospitality and company throughout this special weekend.